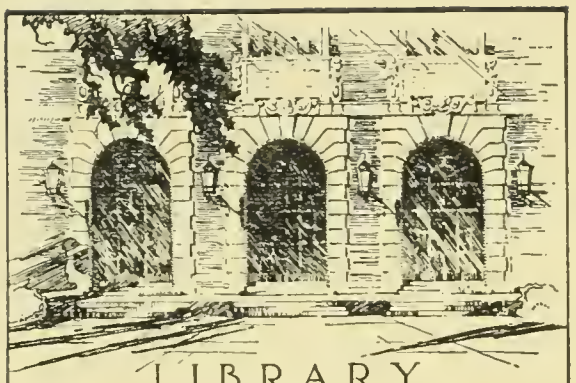

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TWO WORLDS OF FASHION.

LONDON:
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TWO WORLDS OF FASHION.

A Novel.

By CALTHORPE STRANGE.

'Have I dream'd the bearing of our knights
Tells of a manhood ever less and lower?
Or whence the fear lest this my realm, uprear'd
By noble deeds at one with noble vows,
From flat confusion and brute violences,
Reel back into the beast, and be no more?'

TENNYSON, *The Last Tournament.*

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18 CATHERINE ST. STRAND.
1872.

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BOOK II.

The Primrose Path.

(*Continued.*)

CHAPTER IV.

AN HONEST LOVE.

Loosely linked, it is true, but still linked, with the story of Gerald Dalbright's reprehensible life, are the fortunes of two characters destined to play not wholly unimportant parts in that story; these are a young butcher, named John Stedman, and Alice Fenton, an orphan work-girl, to whom the honest fellow's rough but true love was plighted.

Jack, as his friends all called him—and somehow the name seemed to fit him much better than the colder and more formally correct appellation of John—was a broad-shouldered, bright-faced young man of three-and-twenty, assistant to a Bond-street butcher, and the admiration of a small le-

gion of susceptible cook and housemaid admirers of stalwart beauty. But though he was as smart a fellow as you would come across in a day's walk, Jack Stedman was not a bit of a rake; the woman he made love to was the woman he hoped to make his wife, and his choice had finally fallen on Alice Fenton.

This young girl's history was as simple as that of thousands of her class. Deprived of her parents when she was three years of age, she had been brought up by her grandmother with a tenderness in which there was no weakness. Without for a moment pretending to be better than her neighbours, but acting simply on the experiences of a hard life, old Mrs. Fenton strove to train her granddaughter in a manner to enable her to shun the dangers that commonly beset the path of young girls who have to earn their daily bread; and her guidance was thoroughly successful. Alice was eighteen; and though her days had been spent

in the midst of toil and poverty, no cloud had cast its shadow upon her heart, no danger had threatened the innocent peace of her mind.

Taught by her grandmother, Alice followed the poorly-paid and precarious calling of a lace-mender; but so long as a subsistence was to be gained for herself and only friend, she worked early and late without repining at her lot. She had youth, health, and strength, and she had only to look around her to see that, even with the same advantages, others were poorer than herself and grandmother. Heart-free, and with no vain and unattainable fancies to unsettle her mind, she cheerfully worked on and was happy.

It need hardly be said that amusement —such amusement at least as it cost money to indulge in — was rarely enjoyed by Alice and her grandmother; a walk in one of the parks, or along the banks of the Thames, on fine Sunday afternoons, being

their utmost indulgence. In the house in which they lived, in one of the poor and densely populated streets turning off from the King's-road, Chelsea, the Fentons kept themselves entirely to themselves, as their neighbours remarked; and Alice, acting upon her grandmother's entreaties, refrained from making friends of any of the work-girls with whom she was thrown into company. This excellent rule, however, was relaxed in favour of the daughter of a respectable carpenter living in the same house; a young girl about Alice's own age, who was employed as a sempstress in the establishment of a fashionable milliner.

From the conversation of this girl Alice learnt more of what was going on in the world, as it is called, than would otherwise ever have come to her knowledge. No harm came of this companionship, however; for, fortunately, the carpenter's daughter was a well-principled and well-conducted girl, though fond of pleasure, and fond of

trying to arouse in her friend's heart the same longings that were harboured in her own. Her ideas on the subject of pleasure were not very extravagant; an occasional visit to a music-hall in company with her father and a certain Cousin Joe, and to one of the theatres at Christmas time, comprised her experience of delight; only she would have liked the visit to the music-hall to have been at least twice as frequent, and to have had an opportunity of enjoying another pantomime in the course of the twelve months—at Whitsuntide, for example. Alice listened to her friend and sympathised with her tastes, without once envying her her power to gratify them.

Winter, that terrible season for the poor, especially for the aged poor, had, one year, pressed heavily on Mrs. Fenton, bringing her very close indeed to death's-door. Alice worked and watched, day and night, week after week; until the doctor, in announcing the safe recovery of the grandmother, pro-

nounced a strong opinion as to the necessity for careful treatment of the granddaughter, whose health had been seriously undermined by the double strain of the exertions she had made; change of scene and amusement, he declared to be absolutely necessary to the reëstablishment of her strength and spirits.

These directions of the doctor plunged Mrs. Fenton into deep perplexity; how, indeed, were they possibly to be carried out? The poor old soul was too feeble to accompany her granddaughter, and hitherto Alice had rarely stirred abroad without her protection. The necessity was imperative, however; and, though not without great reluctance and a certain undefined terror, she at length consented to permit Alice to walk out in company with the carpenter's daughter. Little by little her uneasiness was quelled by the satisfaction she felt at seeing her darling grandchild recovering her health.

To the carpenter it was a source of comfort to see the companionship of his daughter and Alice thus cemented, and he looked forward to his Sunday walk with the two girls and Cousin Joe with hearty longing. Alice's strength and cheerfulness came back to her; and on her return from these pleasant rambles, the benefit she had derived from them was so manifest, that her grandmother thought rather of encouraging them than of limiting their continuance.

Naturally, quite a new world was opened up to Alice's experience; and most naturally she became the bosom-friend and confidante of her friend Maria, the carpenter's daughter, the first great confidence she received being that Maria and Joe were 'engaged.'

Of all news that one innocent young girl can convey to another, probably, this is the most moving, the most delightful. To Alice it afforded by far the greatest pleasure she had ever experienced; and she

found it impossible to frame in words the depth of sympathetic happiness her friend's communication gave her. From that time the little sempstress seemed to her like a person apart, a mysteriously privileged being, who was to be considered very much indeed, and whose least word was to have the weight of a law. Maria was delighted to be thought so much of, and never tired of kissing her friend, and telling her that 'her turn would come next;' which seemed to her friend, of all impossible circumstances, undoubtedly the most impossible.

The great popular holiday, Easter, was by this time come, and it had been arranged, with the consent of Mrs. Fenton, that Alice was to accompany Maria, her father and mother, and Cousin Joe to the Crystal Palace: it was the first time she had ever been to a place of public amusement, and the prospect was dream-like in its delightfulness. The reality proved little

less delightful. Every object that met her sight was a thing of wonder and dazzling beauty. She was almost too happy to talk with her friends, to whose pleasure the sight of her manifest enjoyment added a new zest.

She had never seen Maria so radiant, so proud of the possession of her 'engaged;' and when that beatified young lady whispered in her ear, 'Isn't he nice? I wish *you* had one, dear!' it sent a strange and exquisitely delightful thrill through her fluttering young heart.

'It *would* be very, very nice to have a sweetheart to talk to one and to show one everything, like Maria,' she thought, without the least envy, but dreamily, as if a sweetheart were a something specially desirable in connection with the enchanted palace of pleasure through which she was silently moving from rapture to rapture.

The little party were making their way out of the theatre, at the end of an opera

which had afforded them all infinite satisfaction, and had seemed to Alice perfectly divine, when Maria's *fiancé* suddenly reached with his walking-stick over the shoulders of two or three people in front of him, and smartly tapped on the crown of a tall young fellow's hat. The person so accosted turned sharply round with a look of surprise, which instantly changed to a smile of pleased recognition.

'Hullo, Tom!' he cried, 'is that you?'

In the course of a few seconds there was a shaking of hands between him and Maria's 'young man,' who formally introduced him to his *fiancée* and her parents.

'Why, who'd 'a thought of seeing *you* down here to-day!' said his friend Tom, whose surname was Pebbles.

'Why not?' replied Jack Stedman, for such was Tom's friend. 'Why not? I didn't know *you* would have been down here *so much* to-day, you know, or I might

have felt uncertain about there being room, of course.'

'Had you there, Tom; dead as a door-nail!' cried the carpenter, laughing as heartily as if Jack's repartee had been as brilliant as one of Sydney Smith's.

'Well, I won't be angry with you this once—if you promise not to do so again,' cried Tom Pebbles readily.

And then the laughter was uproarious—dying away and rising again at the instigation of Maria, till it seemed as if it would never come to an end.

The general wishes of the party having been consulted, it was resolved that 'refreshments' should be partaken of, the more solid portions of which were speedily brought to light from the capacious depths of a basket, which the carpenter and his wife had carried by turns hitherto. Jack Stedman and Tom Pebbles sought one of the bars, and shortly returned with sundry pots of foaming porter to the spot selected for the

repast, which was in one of the classical courts, amid the sculptures of Phidias, which Mrs. Jackson, Maria's mother, thought susceptible of improvement in various ways.

It was while the two young men were gone upon their porter-seeking errand that Maria took an opportunity of questioning her friend in whispers as to what she thought of Tom's good-looking acquaintance.

'Is he good-looking?—I'm sure I didn't notice,' replied Alice, the colour starting to her face, as if she had done something very wrong and been unexpectedly taxed with it.

'Don't blush so, dear! I'm sure there's nothing to be ashamed of if you had looked at him,' said Maria consolingly. 'I've heard my Tom speak of him often, and I'm certain he's respectable, or my Tom wouldn't have anything to do with him. O, how nice it would be, if he was to take a fancy to you!'

'What ever could put such an idea into

your head!' cried Alice, blushing scarlet. 'Hush, pray hush! Here they come back!'

Maria laughingly kissed her friend, and long before the repast was finished had contrived to whisper in her sweetheart's ear that she was sure Alice was 'taken' with his friend Jack Stedman.

The meal, humble as it was, was relished heartily by all who partook of it, the more for the free and frank good humour with which it was seasoned. Jack's pleasant manners made him a favourite with the whole party; and if it was true that Alice had not specially remarked his looks before, as she had told Maria, she had made up for any previous omission by the time the meal was finished; and, had her friend again questioned her, could have accurately reported as to the colour of his hair and eyes—two landmarks of feminine observation.

The evening being very fine, and the view over the Palace grounds tempting, the

little party had agreed to vary their amusement by going down to see what Tom Pebbles—always overflowing with wit and humour, as Maria fondly believed him to be—designated the 'distinct animals:' as soon as the meal was over, therefore, they made for one of the points of exit, laughing as much and happy enough for twice their number at least. Tom and his radiant Maria led the way. Jack, by the mere accident of making a pair with Alice, moved by her side; and the carpenter and his wife, guarding the now considerably-lightened basket, brought up the rear.

Surrounded by so many objects of wonder and admiration, Alice had been held in a state of half speechless and wholly delicious thrall; out in the open air and amid the simpler forms of beauty that met her eyes, she gradually recovered the possession of her more ordinary feelings, and was able to share heartily in the innocent hilarity and easy enjoyment of her friends. Jack, who

had felt a little awkward so long as she had appeared to be shy and silent, quickly grew to be quite at ease with her, and kept up a running fire of lively talk, mostly addressed directly to her.

Before proceeding towards the lower part of the grounds, the party had paused for a moment on one of the upper terraces to admire the broad view, and were descending a flight of steps when they were obliged to make way for a lady and gentleman, who were at the same instant ascending the steps. Alice instantly curtsied as the lady passed, and the lady greeted her with a nod of not unkindly recognition. Apparently the gentleman asked a question, and on being answered looked back at the young needlewoman with interest and unqualified admiration.

The lady and gentleman were Seraphine and Sir Gerald Dalbright, who had come to the Crystal Palace on a popular fête-day as to the only novelty in the way of amuse-

ment the moment offered; and who were on their way to an early dinner in one of the splendidly appointed private dining-rooms in the southern wing of the building.

There was nothing particularly noticeable in the incident, and two words explained it to Maria, who happened to be the only one of the party besides Alice who had taken any heed of it. The lady had employed Alice once or twice to mend lace for her; she was a Mrs. Delcome, and resided at St. John's-wood.

By the time the curiosity and wonder of the party had been sufficiently gratified by the sight of the 'distinct animals,' and Tom had (in Maria's opinion) positively outshone himself by the wit of his remarks—asking Jack if he wasn't glad of the modern improvements in butchers' meat—whether he thought he could cut up the carcass of a megatherium; and which joints of a megalosaurus, in his professional opinion, were

best for boiling?—it was getting dusk, and time to think of the homeward journey.

Determined as they were not to part company, it was not an easy matter to find six seats together in any of the railway carriages, and train after train had to be abandoned; so that, though they intended to reach home very early in the evening—in consideration of the known anxieties of old Mrs. Fenton on her granddaughter's account—it was by no means early when the party actually reached their journey's end, though to Tom and Maria—and it may safely be added, Jack Stedman—the time that had passed on the way seemed nothing.

After taking leave all round, Tom and his friend, whose road was the same, went away together, chatting over the events of the day. It was not long before the lively and experienced Tom noticed that Jack was far less talkative than was his wont, and without hesitation opened on him a heavy

fire of humorous and bantering allusion to the well-known effects on the spirits of too close a study of 'distinct animals' in the society of such good-looking young women as Alice Fenton; to the alarming consequences frequently arising from sitting close to such a party in a crowded railway-carriage; and so on.

Jack gave him as good as he sent, in the way of chaff; but he did not succeed in concealing from his friend that he was interested in Alice Fenton, that he should be very well pleased to find another opportunity of being in her company. So they parted.

Before they had bid each other 'good-night,' the two girls had had a few minutes' confidential talk, into the subject-matter of which Jack Stedman was artfully—and somewhat to Alice's pleased confusion—introduced by Maria, whose last words were:

'You're in love with him, dear, as sure

as I'm in love with Tom; and I'm nearly certain he's in love with you.'

Though firmly repudiating all that her impulsive friend advanced on this subject, Alice was conscious that, in some manner, her mind was pleasantly disquieted; and when her grandmother kissed her before they parted for the night, her brow flushed for no reason that she could ascribe, but as if she were reprehensibly withholding a secret from her dearest friend and protector. On retiring to rest, she was for a long time unable to get to sleep; the events of the day crowded upon her memory, the smallest and least significant details passing and repassing before her eyes; and when at length she slept, her sleep was haunted by dreams bearing strangely the stamp of reality, in which one image constantly returned, and played the chief part—that image was Jack Stedman.

The admiring cooks and housemaids, who daily looked forward to five minutes'

half amatory chat at the area-railings or side-doors of their masters' houses, could hardly have failed to notice a change—to them regrettable—in Jack's manner that Eastertide. If not yet actually in love, as Maria had concluded, his mind was at all events too much impressed with the recollection of Alice to be free for even the most innocent flirtation with any one of them. He felt a growing restlessnesss through the week, and at last could not resist the impulse which seized upon him to ask Tom Pebbles to manage matters so with Maria that he and Alice might meet on the following Sunday.

Maria undertook the office with enthusiasm; and when Alice accepted her invitation to accompany her and Tom for a walk in Battersea Park, the last thing which she could have thought was, that to meet with Jack Stedman in the sub-tropical section of the Park was not a matter of the purest accident; or that for Maria and her Tom to

stray away and leave her and Jack Stedman together for half an hour at a time, was anything more than fortuitous.

Jack's wooing was neither high-flown nor passionate; he was quite sure that he was very fond of Alice, and he soon made equally sure that she was not indisposed to become fond of him in good time, if she was not already so. Alice's heart was too untried, her mind altogether too simple, for her to shroud her feelings in mystery; and therefore she made no difficulty about giving Jack permission to tell his wishes with regard to her to her grandmother.

The old lady had to be approached with some little circumspection, however; for her life had been a hard one, and her experiences not too reassuring on the side of man's dealings with womankind. On being made acquainted with the fact by Tom and Maria, Mrs. Jackson undertook to open the way towards the introduction of Jack Stedman to Mrs. Fenton. The task was not

without difficulty; for Mrs. Fenton, though very poor, 'held her head high,' as Mrs. Jackson had many times remarked, and the prospect to be offered by Jack was not all that the old lady might have hoped for her granddaughter; but by the exercise of some tact and a good deal of patience, Mrs. Fenton, when her tears had become manageable, consented to see Jack.

Fortunately her first impression of her granddaughter's would-be suitor was highly favourable, and the very little he said served to confirm that impression thoroughly.

'You promise to make her happy; keep your promise, and God will bless you as much as I shall!' she sobbed, as she clasped Alice to her bosom.

For the present there was no thought of marriage, Jack's means not being sufficient at that time to justify him in undertaking the responsibility of finding a home for Alice and her grandmother; for he was not so selfish as to think of separating the

two. None of them greatly regretted this position of things; their final happiness was but put off for a few months, and in the meantime all would enjoy a pleasant intercourse, looking forward hopefully to the more promising future. As Alice's acknowleged suitor, Jack devoted all his leisure to her, and, as far as was practicable, constituted himself her guardian in the walks which her work compelled her to take about London, which he knew well enough to distrust.

CHAPTER V.

AN ALLIANCE.

A FEW weeks after the occurrence of the conversation between Lord Carleon and his protégé reported in a previous chapter, two notes of invitation to breakfast were dispatched by the mistress of an elegant villa in St. John's-wood to the mistresses of two other elegant villas in the neighbourhood. It was about half-past one in the day, and the writer of the notes had just risen, and with the help of a skilful maid finished her morning toilet.

The face of this lady was at once aristocratic and provocative, chaste and voluptuous at the same time; that is to say, its expression changed with almost magical facility. Her forehead was high, and in-

dicated strong intelligence; her eyes were large, oriental in form, and velvet-black, now darting forth glittering beams, now veiled in a cloud of thoughtful melancholy. Like the face, of which they were the principal features, they had learned to express all feelings, all passions; like the face, too, they had learned to lie; but in anger they clearly indicated incredible energy.

Such was the face of Seraphine. She was two-and-twenty, with the beauty of an angel and the spirit of a demon.

Her guests arrived within a few minutes after receiving her notes of invitation. They were known in the peculiar society in which they moved as Lotti and Esther.

Lotti was about twenty, but had the appearance of being not more than sixteen or seventeen. She was very small, but exquisitely proportioned, and her face wore so perfect an expression of youthful innocence as easily to deceive even experienced observers. Her eyes were of the fresh and

tender blue of the forget-me-not, and half veiled by long golden lashes. Her hair, rich in its profusion, was of the colour of ripened corn.

Under all these appearances of juvenility and innocence Lotti concealed a precocious and diabolical perversity of character, the more dangerous as they were unsuspected, betraying the unlimited confidence they inspired in the minds of her admirers; for Lotti's life had but one end—money, and the enjoyments procurable by it.

Esther, as her name implies, was a Jewess, exhibiting in her vigorous and luxuriant beauty an admirable type of those Hebraic women, in whose veins the blood of the daughters of the East has descended with all its traditional qualities intact. She was like one of those women with the features of queens and the carriage of goddesses, draped in brocades and crowned with pearls, whom we see in the gorgeous pictures of Paul Veronese.

She was tall and admirably made, her bearing marked by a charming union of nobility and grace. Her eyes were large and oval, as became her Eastern race, the outer corners slightly raised towards the temples, and they wore sometimes a languorous and dreamy expression, sometimes they flashed with fiery ardour.

Her nose was delicately formed and straight; her lips, red and full, were like the flower of the pomegranate; her hair was black as jet, the light throwing upon its rich masses a grape-like purple bloom. A duchess might have envied her her white hands, with her taper fingers and rosy nails. Cinderella's slipper would hardly have been too small for her foot.

The three women seated themselves at a daintily-furnished table, placed opposite an open window looking out upon an enclosed garden.

'My dears,' said Seraphine, uncorking a bottle of champagne, 'when I wrote to

you this morning, I had something else in view besides inviting you to breakfast.'

'We both guessed that,' cried Esther, with a laugh.

'Then you will not be disappointed,' replied Seraphine; 'and that being so, "lend me your ears"—to repeat the polite request of Mark Anthony, as reported by Mr. Shakespeare, and as repeated by me with much undeserved applause on the occasion of three separate prize distributions at the boarding-school where I am supposed to have been highly educated and accomplished.'

'Oh! were you educated at a boarding-school?' cried Lotti in surprise. 'That's why you go in for spelling in your letters, then.'

'Very possibly, I imagine.'

'But who sent you to school, my dear?' inquired Esther—who was the daughter of a dealer in old clothes—between two mouthfuls of cold chicken.

'My father.'

'Your father! you had a father, then?' cried Lotti. 'He must have been rich. Was he a gentleman?'

'My dear,' replied Seraphine impatiently, 'I told you just now that I had something to say to you, and that something is of very much more interest and importance to you than anything—I'm *not* going to tell you about my family affairs.'

'Quite right, my dear. Give me a bit more of that tongue, it's delicious,' said Esther.

'The best of all means for stopping your mouth, my dear,' replied Seraphine, helping her plentifully. 'Now listen to what I am going to say, and don't interrupt, if you can help it, till I've got to the end of the second sentence at least.'

Esther and Lotti promised to be as silent as oysters fried in batter.

'I've a great idea, a grand plan forming in my mind,' said Seraphine, 'and the rea-

son why I take you into my confidence is, because you are something less foolish than most other women of my acquaintance, who live as they can for the day, and never see an inch beyond the night that ends it. These poor idiots always come off badly, and for the most part they deserve no better treatment than they get. The women who don't take advantage of their opportunities are not worthy of the least pity, *I* think!'

The two listeners looked at each other with a puzzled expression in their faces, but they made no remark.

Seraphine continued:

'Now I have thought a good deal upon all this, and of a plan for the emancipation of our sex, or, I should say, of that part of it which *we* represent. My object is, to subject all the men who place themselves in our power to the service of our interests. To carry out my plan I need assistance, and it is to you I first apply for it. I pro-

pose to you to enter into an alliance with me; we will take for our motto the words "Union is Strength," and I promise you that from our united action results shall come that will astonish you by their magnificence.'

For a few moments neither Esther nor Lotti appeared capable of returning an answer to this startling address, so completely were they overcome with surprise. Lotti was the first to recover the use of her tongue.

'It's enough to take away one's breath for a week, my dear,' she cried; 'and as to making out what you mean—it's no good trying to do it. But, wherever you got it from, we all know you've any amount of cleverness, and I feel that most likely you're right in all that you've said; so, for myself, I say—tell me what I'm to do, and I'll do it.'

'Thanks, my dear,' said Seraphine. Then, turning towards Esther, on whose

face there appeared a scarcely disguised expression of doubt she inquired, 'And what do *you* say?'

'If I place myself in your hands to be guided by you, will you make me rich?'

'Yes.'

'And happy?'

'Ask yourself whether to be rich is not to be happy.'

'I think that's certain.'

'Nothing can be more so.'

'Then I say as Lotti says; I place myself in your hands: tell me what I am to do, and I'll do it.'

'You agree,' said Seraphine, addressing them both, 'to act under my direction, for our common interest, with blind submission and absolute confidence?'

'Yes,' they replied.

'You swear it?'

'We swear it!' they cried.

'Then our alliance is signed—we are united and strong!' exclaimed Seraphine,

filling her own and her companions' glasses with champagne. 'On the strength of our compact, I will give you a toast: Here's success to all birds of passage, and may their wings never fail them!'

This partly enigmatical toast was drunk with noisy acclamations. When silence was restored, Lotti remarked:

'This grand planning of yours, Seraphine, reminds me of how well some people get on without the trouble of ever thinking for themselves—that little minx of a ballet-girl, Blondine, for example.'

'Yes, there's a bit of luck!' cried Esther. 'Some women have their own and the devil's too.'

'Do you know this Blondine?' inquired Seraphine, with a slight tone of impatience.

'O yes, I know her,' replied Esther, 'but not much about her.'

'I know her well,' said Lotti; 'she lived quite near me when I lived in Brompton.'

'What sort of a person is she?' asked Seraphine.

'A pretty baby-faced doll,' answered Esther, with marked contempt.

'Calls herself an actress—the humbug!' added Lotti.

'Is she really pretty?' asked Seraphine.

'Somebody thinks her so just now, or she wouldn't hold up her head so high,' said Esther, with an expressive shrug.

'Somebody? Who is it?'

'A young baronet;—Sir Gerald Dalbright, they call him.'

'I never heard of him,' said Seraphine, repeating the name to herself.

'Very likely, my dear,' remarked Lotti; 'the young spoon has not very long been in London. Comes green and fresh from the country.'

'Like the salads Esther is so fond of devouring,' said Seraphine.

'He's a sort of salad that doesn't come in *my* way!' replied Esther, with a sigh.

'Is he rich?' inquired Seraphine.

'A friend of mine tells me he has at least ten thousand a year. An orphan, too! It makes me mad to think of a chance like that falling to the luck of such a nothing of a creature as Blondine.'

'Where did she become acquainted with this estimable young gentleman?'

'At the Princess's, where Lord Carleon took him to supper,' replied Lotti.

'O! he's a friend of Lord Carleon's, eh?' said Seraphine.

'His bosom friend; they're never apart.'

'Is this Sir Gerald Dalbright in love—really in love—with Blondine?'

'Ah! that's more than anybody but he can tell,' replied Lotti; 'most likely he is, the dear innocent, enormously!'

'He must be a greater fool than he looks, if he is!' cried Esther.

'Perhaps he is,' replied Seraphine; 'rich young men are sometimes like that. Does he give her much money?'

'Evidently any amount,' cried Esther angrily; 'for two months ago she hadn't a sixpence, hardly a dress to her back, and lived in a dirty hole of a lodging no one knows where. Now she's got a house of her own with amber-satin window-hangings, dresses fit for a duchess, and bracelets up to her elbows, as if she had the run of Streeter's or Hancock's.'

'All that is so much the better for us,' said Seraphine decisively.

'For us?' cried Esther and Lotti in a breath.

'Remember our engagement,' replied Seraphine. 'The sooner this rich young country greenhorn has thrown away his ready money on this girl, the sooner he will be tired of her incessant childish demands for new finery. Within a month from this day, I promise you that Sir Gerald Dalbright and his thousands a year shall pass out of the hands of Blondine into the hands of one of us three.'

Both Lotti and Esther looked incredulous.

'You doubt my power?' demanded Seraphine.

Lotti raised her eyebrows, and Esther shrugged her handsome shoulders significantly.

'What will convince you?' demanded Seraphine.

'Proofs of what you say, my dear,' replied Esther; 'nothing less.'

'That's about the idea,' said Lotti.

'Trust me, in good time you shall have proofs,' said Seraphine. 'Meanwhile we will consult the Fates as to which of us the prize shall belong.'

She rose as she spoke, and crossed the room to a table, from which she took a book, and then returned to her seat. The book was a volume of a translation of *Monte Christo*.

'You're not going to read to us, my dear, are you?' demanded Lotti, in pre-

tended alarm; 'it's bad enough to read to oneself, but to be read to—'

'Don't be alarmed, my dear; with this book we are only going to consult the Fates, as I said,' replied Seraphine. 'Now, we will each in turn open the volume at hazard, and whoever finds the first letter of the first sentence on the top of either of the opened pages to be the initial letter of either the surname or christian name of Gerald Dalbright, shall take him and his money from Blondine. Will you abide by this test, in which neither can have any advantage over the other?'

'Agreed!' cried the two.

'You be the first to consult the oracle, then,' said Seraphine, handing the book to Lotti.

'Oblige me, if you please, kind Fates!' cried Lotti, carefully inserting a finger between two pages of the mystic volume. 'It's done!'

She opened the book eagerly, but her

countenance instantly fell as she read the opening sentence on the right-hand page: '"O, what an awkward creature I am!"—Like my confounded ill-luck!' she cried, tossing the book to Esther.

The young Jewess's face wore a grave expression, and she was some few seconds before she could decide upon the part of the book into which to insert her taper finger, as if withheld by superstitious awe. The fateful sentence on the top of the left-hand page opened by her ran thus: 'Then these one thousand francs, said Mercedes, shuddering.'

'Neither a G nor a D! I knew it would be so; I never succeed!' she cried, wiping her forehead, on which the perspiration stood in little beads.

Both Seraphine and Lotti had some difficulty in checking their inclination to laugh at the ultra-seriousness exhibited by their discomfited friend.

Without a moment's hesitation, Sera-

phine inserted a finger between the leaves of the book.

'He's mine, doubly mine! for I've drawn two Ds!' she cried, and read aloud the opening sentence on the left-hand page of the book: '"Dead — dead! groaned forth Villefort, in a paroxysm of agony."'

'But, now that it's decided you are to take him away from Blondine, how is that to benefit *us?*" demanded Esther sharply.

'When I've arranged my plans, I'll tell you,' replied Seraphine. 'Till then, don't forget your promise to obey me—"with blind submission and absolute confidence," were the words of the engagement.'

The conversation was continued through the rest of the afternoon; and the treaty of alliance was celebrated in so many bumpers of champagne, that towards evening Lotti became super-sentimental, and poured into the ears of Seraphine (who did not hear a word she said) the tearful Odyssey of her first love; while Esther curled herself up

like a cat upon the hearth-rug, and sang herself to sleep.

Seraphine alone remained calm and clear-headed, debating within herself by what macchiavellian devices she was to succeed in despoiling Blondine of her rich protector.

CHAPTER VI.

THE COUNTESS OF PENTARVON.

During the two months he had been in London Gerald had been a regular, not to say frequent, visitor at the house of the Principessa di Volani in Regent's-park; but a much more considerable portion of his time had been spent in the society of Blondine. He had become an *habitué* of the operas and theatres, and he had been elected a member of two or three of the most aristocratic clubs. London and its many ways of living were, in fact, no longer strange to him at the moment when Seraphine and her two companions—of whose existence he was entirely ignorant—had entered into their extraordinary compact concerning him.

About the time when Seraphine suc-

ceeded in getting her guests to retire to their own houses, Gerald, in company with Lord Carleon, was ascending the stairs of one of the best mansions in St. James'-square, where a ball was being given by the Marquis and Marchioness of Rosethorn.

After presenting his young friend to the Marchioness, Lord Carleon, who had left off dancing, strolled to one of the whist-tables, where he was heartily welcomed, and soon absorbed in the game.

At first Gerald felt that the balls given by the Princess were infinitely more enjoyable. He was a stranger in the elegant crowd, and a sense of isolation weighed heavily upon his spirits. In passing through the drawing-rooms, however, he came upon a little knot of young men, who, like himself, were constant vistors at the house in Regent's-park.

His sensations changed in a moment; and after shaking hands all round, he felt no more embarrassment than if he had been

the guest of the Principessa instead of the Marchioness of Rosethorn.

After passing in review the scandalous chronicle of the town—in which operation the name of the lady of rank was held no more sacred than that of the commonest figurante—each of the young *roués* had some little mystery—true or false—to recount, some libertine anecdote to tell, of which he was, or pretended to be, the hero.

In the eyes of this knot of elegantly-attired, and most of them nobly-born, young men no virtue found favour, no woman's reputation was safe from attack.

Gerald listened to the talk of these young Lovelaces with apparent indifference, but really with feelings of deep admiration and secret jealousy. He promised himself the glory of equalling their successes, however—of inscribing in his book of victories names as high as any they had made free with.

The group was joined by a tall pale

man of about six-and-twenty years of age, but who appeared to be at least ten years older. He was a younger son of the Duke of Ampthill, and had plunged heavily on the turf, but had been 'pulled through' at the cost of terrible family sacrifices.

'Hallo, Alf! what news from the parts where the pretty women grow?' cried one of the party, shaking hands with the newcomer. 'O, by the bye, let me introduce you to a new friend of mine—friend of Carleon's too: Lord Alfred Fitzcole—Sir Gerald Dalbright.'

The two young men thus introduced bowed to each other, and then the conversation went on again with renewed vigour.

'Well, the best bit of news I can give you is, that, if you keep your eyes open, you'll see here to-night the loveliest woman in London.'

'O, that's a stale joke, Alf!' cried one of the party; 'I've been shown the loveliest woman in London six times every season

for the last ten years. You can order her in by the dozen, my dear fellow, like Haymarket champagne.'

'I'll bet you fifty pounds you own I'm right the moment you see her,' said Lord Alfred.

'By Jove! who is she, then?'

'A friend of my sister Lady Elsworth's—they were schoolfellows—and she's told me all about her. She was married last autumn to the Earl of Pentarvon, and she and her husband have just returned from Egypt.'

'I remember Pentarvon at Oxford,' said another of the party. 'Queer sort of a fellow; seemed as if he could do everything, but didn't care to do it. Kept aloof from the men of his college, went in for honours and that sort of thing. I fancy he writes books or something of that kind on Egyptology. Jolly look-out that for his young wife, I should say!'

'Let's go and find her,' suggested one

of the party; and the suggestion was acted on without a moment's delay.

On reaching the chief drawing-room, Lord Alfred looked on all sides for the lady of whom they were in search; but she was nowhere to be seen.

'I see how it is,' he remarked at length; 'my sister has vanished too. I'll bet a hundred the two of them have ensconced themselves in some out-of-the-way corner, and are pouring into each other's sympathetic ears the thousand-and-one-times-repeated story of their charmingly-miserable school-days. Come with me; we'll find 'em yet.'

Half a minute later, Lord Alfred had found the objects of his search, seated in a sort of alcove formed with ferns and exotics, in a passage leading to a brilliantly-illumined conservatory. The knot of men paused before they were observed by the two ladies, and remained almost within earshot.

Lady Pentarvon was indeed a woman

of exquisite beauty, who might fairly challenge comparison with the most beautiful women in London. She was about twenty years of age, tall, fair, and slender, without the least approach to thinness. Her dress reached the limits of all that is most charming in simplicity. She seemed a very incarnation of modest and unconscious grace. Her eyes were blue and deep, and expressed immaculate innocence of soul. Her lips were alive with the smiles of a supremely happy heart.

'What do you say now, old fellow?' cried Lord Alfred in a whisper to the young man who had expressed a doubt of the Countess's reported beauty.

'I was wrong, by Jove!' replied the other. 'She *is* a beauty, and no mistake! I've seen a good deal of beauty of one sort or another, but never anything equal to this. You know what my opinion of marriage is? Well, unearth me another such woman as Lady Pentarvon, and, as I'm a

sinner, I'll unsay the past, do several extraordinary things besides, and pronounce the legitimate, respectable, and irrevocable Yes; in short, the wolf shall dress himself thenceforth in lambskin, and the serpent submit his teeth to the pincers of the nearest dentist.'

'My dear boy, you're becoming too good for this world,' replied Lord Alfred; 'I believe you've been dining off tracts,—quite against club-rules.'

Lady Elsworth was several years older than Lady Pentarvon, dark-complexioned, and somewhat massively built, her beauty—for she was decidedly handsome—serving as an admirable contrast for that of her companion. The two ladies were engaged in confidential talk, and wholly unaware of the observation of which they—or rather one of them—were the object.

'And you are perfectly happy, Blanche?' asked Lady Elsworth with tender sympathy.

'So perfectly,' replied Lady Pentarvon, 'that I sometimes ask myself whether I am not living in a dream from which I must, at some time, awake.'

'You love your husband very much, then?'

'Who would not love him!'

'Is he very handsome?'

'I thought you saw him just now—when we first arrived?'

'I hardly looked at him—I was so overjoyed at seeing *you;* so I ask you again,—is he very handsome?'

'I really cannot tell you.'

'Why?'

'Because I really do not know,—perhaps my heart and eyes may both deceive me. All I know is, that I love him with all my heart, and believe there is nobody in the world comparable with him.'

'What delightful enthusiasm!' cried Lady Elsworth, laughingly.

'No,—it is not enthusiasm, but adora-

tion, respect, deep and boundless tenderness! If you only knew him! But you *will* know him; and then you will be able to judge how worthy to be adored he is.'

'O, I'll not wait to know him, but admit at once that he's a very phœnix of men,' exclaimed Lady Elsworth.

'That he is!' cried Lady Pentarvon gaily; 'only I won't submit him to the test of the fire, for fear he should not return from the ashes.'

'Was it a long engagement?'

'Hardly an engagement at all. After leaving Oxford, Henry travelled abroad for five or six years. Papa had made his acquaintance at Constantinople and taken a great liking to him—as well he might. In fulfilment of a promise to visit papa, Henry—Lord Pentarvon's name is Henry—came down to our place in Cornwall, on his return to England, a year ago. He stayed with us a few days, and then he went to his own place, Pentarvon Castle.'

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'And in a very little time came back again?' asked Lady Elsworth archly.

'In less than a week,' replied Lady Pentarvon naïvely.

'And stayed that time—?'

'A whole week.'

'And when he went away, you missed him—?'

'Very much—papa also.'

'Especially your papa;—I can easily imagine that.'

'I know you are laughing; but you shall see. Henry had hardly left us that time, when papa took me into his sanctum, and, without the least preparation, asked me how I liked his friend. Of course, I said I liked him very much—because I *did*.'

'And what did your papa say to that?'

'O, nearly frightened me out of my wits, by asking me if I did not think he would suit me for a husband as well as if he had been made for me to order! I couldn't answer a word,—the idea of mar-

riage, you know, was so far from my mind.'

'At nineteen it naturally would be,' replied Lady Elsworth, laughing.

'I daresay it was very silly—but I *couldn't* answer a word. Papa burst out laughing, and then kissed me, saying: "I'll give you half an hour to make up your mind. During that time I'll write two little notes—one inviting him to breakfast tomorrow morning; the other telling him that we start at once for the Continent, with the intention of remaining abroad for an indefinite period: a groom will ride over to Pentarvon Castle with one of them,—which is it to be?"'

Lady Elsworth laughed heartily at the novelty of the method employed.

'Surely your papa must, at some time of his life, have practised the composition of some of those ingenious romances one gets from Mr. Mudie's library!'

'I'm sure he is quite capable of it!'

replied Lady Pentarvon with affectionate pride. 'Well, at the end of the half hour he came to me with the two notes in his hand, and said, "The messenger's ready to start: which note is to go?" I threw myself into his arms, and don't know what I said.'

'But,—next morning Lord Pentarvon came to breakfast?'

'And every day, for six weeks. He spent most of his time with us, in fact; coming early in the morning, and leaving late at night. In this way I learned to know him, to appreciate the noble qualities of his heart and mind—to love him; for to know him is inevitably to love him, he is in all respects so good and excellent. He is a little uncouth in manner, and does not care much for society, his chief delight being in study; and, do you know, sometimes I can't help feeling a certain amount of awe in talking with him, he knows so much! But in all this he is so different to the men one ordinarily meets; and how much the more

I love him, from knowing his superiority of intelligence, intellect, and heart, to any of these.'

Lady Elsworth listened smilingly to her beautiful friend's laudation of her husband, watching the play of her expressive features with a feeling of half-surprise at the pure enthusiasm they exhibited.

'It is one of the chief sources of my great happiness,' continued Lady Pentarvon, 'that Henry has lived so much apart from society, and so has escaped its influences. Thanks to his taste for study and isolation, his heart was as new to love as mine—for he has never loved but me, as I have never loved but him.'

'O, my dear!' cried Lady Elsworth, 'you do quite right to believe everything that is good of your husband—but—'

'You doubt.'

'Or I can't easily believe.'

'Why not? have you or I ever loved anybody besides our husbands?'

'That proves nothing, my love; we are women—our husbands are men.'

'Of course; but what difference does that make?'

'Well, it is generally supposed to—to—in fact—' She fairly broke down in her attempted demonstration, and laughed heartily at her own failure. 'I give up the task, and make the *amende honorable!*' she added. 'I declare that I was wrong ever to think of suggesting a doubt; and that, as I admitted before, Lord Pentarvon is nothing less than a phœnix!'

'You shall laugh at me as much as you like, my dear Helen,' cried Lady Pentarvon; 'my happiness is too great and too solid to be shaken.'

'And nobody will be more glad than I to find it remain as it is,' replied Lady Elsworth, warmly pressing her friend's hand. 'And now, tell me about your plans. Do you settle in London?'

'Yes, we have taken a house in Berkeley

Square, and shall always come to town once a year at least. We shall have a reception one night in the week during the season. It is Henry's wish.'

'That will be delightful! So we shall see a great deal of each other, even if we cannot be the inseparables of our old school-days.'

The two ladies rose and passed into the drawing-room, without perceiving the group of young men by whom they had so long been closely observed.

'Do you think, Fitzcole, her husband's worthy of her?' asked the man who had spoken of having known Lord Pentarvon at Oxford, and whose name was Lord Fordwick.

'I don't know. Why?'

'Well, you know,' replied Lord Fordwick, 'women rarely place their affections well.'

'Deuced rarely; and very likely *she* hasn't, being neither more nor less than a

daughter of the first woman, who placed her affections in a most objectionable manner on an apple. I should be inclined to bet even that the Countess of Pentarvon will follow what I daresay we all believe to be the established rule of her sex, and will *not* love her husband to all eternity.—What is your opinion, Sir Gerald?'

Gerald gave no answer to this question. His gaze was riveted upon the face of the beautiful Countess, in the contemplation of which he was absorbed, to the exclusion of all other consciousness.

Lord Alfred nudged the elbow of Lord Fordwick, to direct his attention to Gerald, and whispered in his ear:

'A case of moth and candle.'

'Evidently. But he'll lose his wings.'

'Who knows?'

'Why,—do you suppose—'

'I suppose nothing, my dear boy. But this young fellow is devilish handsome, and

there's a something in the way he's looking at the Countess which would make me feel anything but comfortable if I were her husband.'

CHAPTER VII.

A VAIN APPEAL.

Lady Rosethorn's drawing-rooms, deserted for a while in favour of the supper-table, were speedily refilled; and the ball, pleasantly interrupted, was continued with renewed spirit and enjoyment.

The Countess of Pentarvon had spent the earlier hours of the night in conversation, especially devoting herself to the society of her schoolfellow, the sister of Lord Alfred Fitzcole; but at twenty women like to dance, and at the first instigation of the music, she rose and—in spite of custom and all such considerations — led her husband into a quadrille.

After that—as if, her husband being no longer by her side, the dance and not the

dancers was all she cared to notice—she engaged herself to any and every body who solicited the pleasure of dancing with her.

On consulting her ivory tablets the next day, she was infinitely amused to find that she had engaged herself for thirty-three quadrilles, twenty-nine waltzes, and an uncertain number of galops; and it was half-past one before she had made the first entry!

Gerald was among the earliest of those who had been inscribed on the favoured list, and obtained the third quadrille. His turn arrived, and he led her to her place.

It need hardly be said that bashfulness was not one of his strongest characteristics. He had youth, intelligence, good looks, fortune—in short, all that might most strongly aid in inspiring him with self-confidence; but nevertheless, in presence of this gentle and beautiful young wife, whose innocence surrounded her as with a visible halo, he

became as awkward and timid as a raw unmannerly schoolboy.

While her charming hand rested in his, the faculties of his mind were sealed up; he was incapable of doing more than meeting the requirements of the dance. If he had been desirous of speaking, it is hardly too much to affirm that he would have found it impossible to do so. More than once the Countess—though the idea of banter, however innocent, was far from her thoughts—could not repress a half smile at the obstinate dumbness of her partner.

Gerald observed these evidences of the Countess's amusement at his expense, and they stung him to the quick. Another circumstance contributed not a little to the augmentation of his embarrassment: he noticed that Lord Carleon was standing near, contemplating him with anxious attention.

Lord Carleon perfectly understood what was passing: Gerald felt sure of this, and

also that in Lord Carleon's mind must have arisen a painful idea, on seeing that, apart from the society of such women as formed the guests of the Regent's-park Princess, he was completely out of his depth.

All these things were as so many pin-pricks, no doubt; but a pin may sometimes inflict a wound more painful than the stab of a dagger. Gerald heartily cursed himself for his want of self-government. The immediate effect of these little humiliations, however, was to increase his passion — which he called love—for Lady Pentarvon. The only way to raise himself in the eyes of his friend and in those of the Countess, he repeated to himself, would be to bring to a rapid and glorious conclusion the adventure he had so clumsily entered upon. And he determined to neglect nothing to bring about this conclusion.

The quadrille over, some portion of his discomfort was brought to an end. He re-conducted Lady Pentarvon to her seat. At

the same moment, he saw Lord Alfred Fitzcole and Lord Fordwick approaching. His feelings and temper were still too much ruffled to make him desire the sort of companionship offered by these two free-talkers; he therefore slipped into the crowd, and, without being noticed, left the house.

Day was breaking as he stepped into the open air. He lit a cigar, and, the morning being beautifully fresh and clear, walked slowly and in a melancholy mood to his house in Mayfair.

It was late in the day when he rose, but he was in excellent humour; for in his dreams he had seen himself successful in his suit to the beautiful Countess, and he accepted the vision as of good augury.

He had but just finished dressing when his valet announced Lord Carleon. On decending to the morning-room, in which his visitor was awaiting him, he saw at a glance that Lord Carleon was under the influence of some strong feeling.

'Anything the matter, my dear fellow?' he asked, as he took his hand.

'No; nothing is the matter—with me,' replied Lord Carleon, in a tone of voice not at all in harmony with the assurance conveyed by his words.

Gerald did not insist, and there were a few moments of silence.

'What did you do with yourself last night, or rather this morning?' asked Lord Carleon at length. 'I suddenly lost sight of you.'

'O, I had had enough of the ball,' answered Gerald, 'and left.'

'On foot?'

'Yes.'

'You were bored, then?'

'No, not exactly bored; but I had had enough of it.'

'There was a large number of pretty women, was their not?'

'Very.'

'Did you see any one in particular that attracted your notice?'

'No, not one.'

'Indeed! I fancied, on the contrary—' He paused.

'Fancied what?' inquired Gerald.

'That your attention was very particularly attracted by the wonderfully beautiful woman with whom I saw you dancing.'

'You fancied that, did you?'

'Yes, I did,' replied Lord Carleon gravely.

'I assure you, you were quite mistaken,' replied Gerald, with a smile, to which he tried to give a look of simple naturalness, but unsuccessfully.

'What is the use of telling me a falsehood?' demanded Lord Carleon, in a tone almost of severity.

'A falsehood!' repeated Gerald with surprise, but without irritation, for the paternal manner of Lord Carleon forbade resentment.

Up to this point in the conversation Lord Carleon had continued standing; he now seated himself, and, in a voice from the tones of which all severity had been removed, again addressed Gerald:

'My dear Gerald, however displeasing to you my frankness may be—though you may look upon me as the impertinent censor of things that do not concern me—though I may lose for a time your affection, which is a hundred times more precious to me than you can imagine—I must nevertheless frankly tell you what is my mind, advise you, and beg of you to follow my advice.'

He paused; and Gerald, greatly surprised at this grave exordium, awaited what more he should say with some little impatience and a good deal of uneasiness.

'I am more than double your age,' Lord Carleon went on; 'I might be your father. I have paid dearly for the experience of life I possess. By the aid of this experience

I am able to read what is passing in your mind, and to see there things which distress me deeply. You have turned your eyes upon a lady, Gerald — the lady who was your partner in the dance last night; it was her I alluded to just now—the Countess of Pentarvon; and you have conceived hopes of becoming her lover.'

'You are mistaken — completely mistaken!' cried Gerald hastily. 'It is quite true that I was greatly struck by her beauty; but that was all—absolutely all.'

'Give me your word of honour, Gerald, and I will believe you.'

Gerald was silent.

'You see,' said Lord Carleon.

'Well, after all, since you question me, why should I deny it?' cried Gerald. 'Yes, I have fallen in love with her.'

'No,' exclaimed Lord Carleon, 'you do *not* love her; for what you now feel for her is no more than a caprice, a passing fancy —even less perhaps.'

'Not so,' cried Gerald; 'I feel that I really love her.'

'Then, if it is as you say, you must clearly understand that for her happiness it is your duty to fly; since, whatever may be to you the issue of your unfortunate passion, for her it can only be a source of suffering—perhaps of despair.'

'I ought to understand this, you say; but, indeed, I understand nothing of the kind.'

'Do you know, Gerald, who and what the Countess of Pentarvon is?'

'I know that she is the loveliest woman I have ever set eyes on.'

'Do you also know that she is, as well as being one of the most beautiful women in the world, one of the purest and best?—that she loves with all the ardour of her young soul a husband to whom she is ten thousand times dearer than life?'

'I can imagine as much.'

'And yet you can think of coming be-

tween the happiness of two such people! Gerald, your heart is too young to be closed against all generous feelings. Reflect upon the depth of the abyss towards which you are about to drag this happy and innocent lady; reflect, and I am sure you will draw back. Supposing that the Countess of Pentarvon—though the supposition is incredible—should come to forget her duty to her husband, and should give ear to your deceitful addresses, what future could you offer her that would make up to her for the sacrifice she had made for you, and what answer would you be able to give her when she demanded of you a reckoning for her lost happiness—lost by your fault?'

Gerald bowed his head and made no reply.

'Now,' continued Lord Carleon, 'suppose—and this will inevitably happen—suppose Lady Pentarvon repulses with indignation your pursuit, your mortification will be the least regrettable result; by your very

failure you will have compromised the happiness of the woman you pretend to love. You will have stained a reputation until then spotless; for the world is careless and unjust in the verdicts it pronounces, and will seldom admit that any man would dare to declare his passion for a woman without having received encouragement.'

Gerald still maintained silence.

'Nor is this all,' Lord Carleon continued. 'Jealous suspicions may be awakened in Lord Pentarvon's mind; his tender confidence in his wife may be dissipated, never to be renewed. Then farewell the peace of this poor household, which, from a little heaven upon earth, will be turned into a hell.'

Lord Carleon paused, and awaited whatever answer the other intended to make. Gerald raised his head.

'You are right, entirely right, in all you have said,' he replied; 'but I love her.'

'You must stifle your love.'

'Impossible.'

'Everything is possible that one wills to do.'

'Except to conquer one's love—as *you* well know, Lord Carleon.'

'I do not quite understand what you mean by that.'

'I mean to say that all these moral considerations which you are now seeking to impress upon me *you* should have acted upon two or three-and-twenty years ago, instead of allowing your passion for two women to bring both of them to grief, and at the same time.'

Lord Carleon turned deadly pale, and rose from his seat.

'That is a cruel reproach!' he cried; 'and, however just it may be, I did not expect it from your lips.'

Without adding another word, he shook the hand which Gerald held towards him, and at once took his departure from the house.

Left alone, Gerald shrugged his shoulders.

'To-morrow,' he thought, 'Fitzcole is to introduce me to his sister, the intimate friend of my too-beautiful Countess. *Allons!* What will be, will be.'

CHAPTER VIII.

SERAPHINE SPREADS HER NET.

SELECTED by the oracle for the work of winning Sir Gerald Dalbright from the triumphant and wholly unsuspecting Blondine, the crafty and intellectually-powerful Seraphine lost not a moment in arranging her plan of action. Blondine's influence she regarded with little more than contempt; and if she had had no greater object in view than to obtain a momentary victory over a rival, the means of succeeding would have cost her hardly a moment's consideration.

It is a rule of good strategy, before laying siege to any stonghold, to ascertain the resources and interior dispositions of the place to be besieged. Seraphine's first care, therefore, was to make herself minutely ac-

quainted with the habits, tastes, and occupations of Sir Gerald Dalbright; and, thanks to an ingeniously-organised system of espionage, every detail of his existence was in a very short time brought to her knowledge; and particularly a list of his most intimate friends.

So soon as she was satisfied as to the completeness of her information, she concluded that it was time to commence operations, and commenced accordingly.

Several of Gerald's friends were known to her; and there would have been no difficulty in getting herself introduced to him, if such had been the mode of proceeding she had determined on. Her plan was widely different, however; and required that the introduction should be sought by Gerald himself, and appear as a favour granted to him.

The first movement towards success was obviously to attract his attention without the appearance of design. To effect this,

she hired an elegant open carriage, in which she drove a pair of beautifully-matched ponies; and every day, as Gerald rode in the Park, she passed and repassed him in such a way that it was not possible for him to miss seeing her.

On some occasions, however, Blondine appeared in the Park in a stylish brougham, and then invariably Seraphine turned her ponies' heads and avoided a meeting. On other days her attendance was constant. At the end of a fortnight she had the satisfaction of feeling certain that Gerald had remarked her, and that with thoroughly awakened interest.

'Who was she?' Gerald had begun to ask himself; when suddenly the mysterious beauty of the pony-carriage ceased her daily visits to the Park. More than that, she remained entirely secluded in her house. Her intention in this was abundantly successful: from the moment Gerald noticed her absence from the Park, he thought of her

twenty times more than he had ever done before.

For the first three days he looked out for her, in the hope that her daily drives had only been interrupted for a day or two; but when the fourth day passed without her reappearing, a vague sort of disquiet began to take possession of his mind, growing into positive anxiety.

He blamed himself for not having thought of following her pony-carriage, so that he might have been able to ascertain her address and something about her. Now it was too late, and this reflection filled him with irritation.

His mind being thus engrossed by the idea of the vanished beauty, he almost completely neglected Blondine; of this fact Seraphine was speedily informed by the able spy whom she had employed to dog his steps. While rejoicing, therefore, in the success already achieved, she looked for-

ward with perfect security to the final triumph of her scheme.

Her next move was no less well-considered.

A French opera-company, which included Madame Schneider, was at this time performing at St. James's Theatre, and Gerald—as Seraphine had informed herself—made, almost nightly, one of the occupants of the first row of the stalls.

Seraphine armed herself; that is to say, she arrayed herself in a *toilette* most scientifically arranged to bring her beauty into relief, and, as it were, to double its immediate effectiveness. She had secured a box directly in a line with the seat usually occupied by Gerald; and during the performance of the first act of *La Grande Duchesse*, she quietly took her seat. As soon as she was seated, a glance told her that Gerald was in the place where she had expected to find him.

Once assured of his presence, she looked no more in the direction of his seat, but

appeared to give her undivided attention to what was passing on the stage. But women see with their shoulders, their backs, their hair, with every part of themselves in fact, when they have an object in seeing. Seraphine therefore, though she appeared to look at nothing but the characters of the opera, saw Gerald perfectly.

So quiet and entirely unobtrusive had been her entry into the box, that it was not until the end of the first act of the opera that Gerald noticed her presence in the theatre. The sight of her caused him to start, and the blood to mount to his forehead.

Seraphine took good heed of both these circumstances.

Gerald nudged the elbow of his friend Lord Alfred Fitzcole, who sat next him, and drew his attention to the mysterious fair one in the box. After turning his opera-glass upon her face for a moment, Lord Alfred answered vivaciously:

'By Jove, yes—it's Seraphine!'

'Seraphine?'

'Yes. Lovely creature!'

'You know her, then?'

'In other words, you are dying to enjoy an equal amount of felicity?'

'I own, my dear Fitzcole, I'm awfully taken with her. Used to see her every day in the Park a little while ago, but without knowing who she was.'

'And now that you know it,' said Lord Alfred with a smile, 'you wouldn't be sorry to find an opportunity to tell her what an impression she has made upon you?'

'You've guessed it exactly.'

'Well, where's the difficulty?'

'My dear fellow, I tell you I don't know her.'

Lord Alfred laughed, and rose from his seat.

'Stop here,' he said; 'I'm going out for a turn.' And without waiting for any reply from Gerald, he left the stalls.

Seraphine had observed the two men

in conversation, and had divined the exact nature of their talk. She expected to see Lord Alfred leave the stalls; yet, when he entered her box a few minutes later, she half-turned, and made a gesture of surprise.

'Is it you?' she cried.

'Does the sight of me astonish you?'

'A little. It's so many ages since you gave me any sign of your existence, I thought you had at least forgotten me.'

'No, by Jove, Seraphine, you *didn't* think that!' cried Lord Alfred, in a tone of reproach.

'Well, so much the better, if I was wrong,' she cried; 'I can't bear to think I have lost a friend. "Love flies, friendship stays," is a proverb as old as the world, and as true as it's old.—What news, my dear Alfred?'

'The very newest is something that concerns you.'

'That concerns me!' she cried, in a tone of extreme surprise.

'Did you notice the young man I was talking with just now, before I left the stalls?'

'No; what of him?'

'He is a friend of mine — a bachelor, rich—'

'I've no objection, I'm sure; but, also, I don't see in what way this concerns me.'

'He has seen you often in the Park.'

'A good many people besides him have seen me there, I fancy.'

'But not with his eyes. Ever since you have been in the theatre to-night, his look has been riveted upon you. He thinks you charming!'

'He gives proof of good taste.'

'He loves you.'

Seraphine burst into a hearty laugh.

'And he is impatient to tell you so—or rather to prove it,' cried Lord Alfred.

Seraphine instantly became serious.

'I understand you now,' she said. 'You pay me this visit, not on your own account,

but as the ambassador of one of your friends; by all means fulfil your mission—I am bound to listen to all you have to say.'

Gerald, from his seat in the stalls, kept his eyes fixed upon Seraphine's box, studying the faces of the two interlocutors, and trying to understand, by the play of their features, the different phases of the dialogue being carried on between them. But the most he could do was to establish in his mind the certainty that their conversation referred to himself, though what they were actually saying remained to him a closed book.

As if for the express purpose of escaping from this close scrutiny, Seraphine rose from the place she occupied in the front of the box, and seated herself so as to be out of his range of view. Lord Alfred placed himself opposite to her, and the conversation was continued.

It may here be noted, in passing, that

Blondine occupied one of the stage-boxes immediately below Seraphine's; the two rivals were thus, by chance, placed one above the other. Seraphine was ignorant of this circumstance; but had she known it, she would have drawn from it a favourable augury,—already she dominated the woman she had determined to triumph over!

Lord Alfred Fitzcole pleaded, if not eloquently, at least vigorously, for the favour his friend desired, and finished by what he thought an extremely clever stroke—a proposal to Seraphine to join Gerald and himself at a little dinner at the Star-and-Garter on the following day. To his infinite surprise and mortification the invitation was instantly declined.

'Do you really mean to say that's your last word?' he inquired in a piqued tone.

'My very last, so don't bother me by making me repeat it.'

'O, well, if you are in that state of mind, I've no wish to bore you. I'd better

take my leave perhaps, before you favour me by telling me to go.'

He rose as if to quit the box, but Seraphine detained him.

'You don't bore me the least in the world, my dear Alfred,' she said, 'and you know that well. Stay as long as you like, your company will be pleasant to me. Talk to me about everything you happen to think of—the weather, politics, the piece they are playing to-night, the piece they played last night, and the piece they are going to play to-morrow night; tell me about your horses, and about whatever else most strongly interests you. Only don't invite me to dinner to meet friends of yours—and particularly don't torment me about this Sir Gerald Dalbright, a young man in whom I take not the remotest particle of interest.'

Just as Seraphine finished this artful address, the orchestra began to play the introduction to the second act, in which

occurs Madame Schneider's indescribably significant scene with Fritz. Lord Alfred remained a few minutes longer before rising to take his leave.

'You are not annoyed with me?' asked Seraphine, pressing his hand.

'For what?'

'For my refusal to receive your friend.'

'Not at all.'

'Will you prove it to me?'

'How?'

'By fetching me a glass of water,' replied Seraphine, laughing.

'Is that all?' cried Lord Alfred, and he left the box.

Gerald, whose impatience had increased from the moment when Seraphine and Lord Alfred had retired from the front of the box, had left the stalls and was pacing the lobby at the back of the boxes when his friend reappeared.

'Well, my dear fellow, what has kept you so long?'

'All you need know is, that she refuses to be introduced to you,' replied Lord Alfred.

Gerald blushed with mortification, but strove hard to conceal the effect of his friend's communication.

'Aren't you coming back to your seat to see the second act?' he asked, in the most indifferent tone he could assume.

'Presently,' replied Lord Alfred. 'Confound her impudence!' he added; 'she's had the audacity to send me for a glass of water, and I must fetch it, as I don't want her to see that I am vexed.'

'You are going back to her, then?' demanded Gerald.

'Yes.'

'I've an idea!' cried Gerald.

'What is it?'

'Come up to the refreshment saloon, and while you are getting your glass of water I'll tell you.'

Seraphine glowed with pride and joy at

seeing the rapid and complete success of her schemes—a success which went far beyond her most sanguine hopes. Even before she had made any direct advances, the man she desired to subdue was already at her feet, or at least wished for nothing better than to throw himself there. Lord Alfred's embassy furnished the proof.

Now, in the course she had taken with Lord Alfred, she had played a master-stroke —one of those strokes which, on the field of battle, decide the fate of nations. She judged that the apparent impossibility of gaining access to her would have the effect of blowing into a powerful flame the spark which had been lighted in Gerald's heart—of transforming his caprice of the hour into a possibly abiding passion; and she knew something of the human heart.

These things were passing in her mind when Lord Alfred reëntered her box with a glass of water. He was not alone, however; for in the shadow behind him she

recognised Gerald. She made a movement of extreme surprise; but Lord Alfred gave her no time to collect herself.

'Allow me,' he said, moving aside so as to bring Gerald into full view, 'to have the honour of presenting to you my friend Sir Gerald Dalbright, whose most ardent desire it is to have the pleasure of occasionally paying his respects to you.'

Seraphine answered the profound bow made her by Gerald with a cold and slight inclination of the head; then turning to Lord Alfred with the dignity of an offended princess, she said:

'Lord Fitzcole, you have behaved this evening with a bad taste of which I could never have supposed you capable. What you have now done is a gratuitous impertinence which I have not merited—from which I supposed myself to be secure.'

'Good heavens! by Jove!' cried Lord Alfred in extreme embarrassment, 'I really had no notion—I beg your pardon—'

'Oblige me by saying no more,' said Seraphine sharply, interrupting him; 'and farther oblige me by, from this time, forgetting the way to my house, where I shall never again be at home to you.' Then she added, in a tone somewhat less offended: 'As for you, Sir Gerald Dalbright, who are so strongly desirous of paying your respects to me that you have taken means to force yourself into my presence in spite of my expressed wishes, it would be painful to me to think that you had any intention to offend me. I shall be glad to hear from you an explanation of your motives; but the present is neither a fit time nor a fit place. I shall be at home to-morrow afternoon at two o'clock, and happy to receive you, if you wish it. Good evening, gentlemen.'

And after having saluted them with a haughty inclination of the head, Seraphine turned her back upon them, rested her elbow on the velvet ledge of her box, and

appeared to give herself up to the enjoyment of the opera.

'The devil take her!' cried Lord Alfred, about to dash down upon the floor of the lobby the glass of water he had all this time been holding; but thinking better of it, he drank the water, handed the glass to an attendant, and then strode out of the theatre, followed by Gerald, in such ill-temper that it was a long time before he could tell his friend the address of the insolent Seraphine.

It happened that, as the audience was leaving the theatre at the end of the performance, Blondine and Seraphine found themselves face to face in the vestibule, waiting for their carriages. They were not on speaking terms; certain disdainful remarks of Seraphine's having been repeated to the other, had led to the exhibition of a sort of half-shown resentment whenever they met. Elated by her prosperity, Blondine regarded the other with a mocking

smile, which Seraphine repaid by a look of proud disdain that would have startled any one but Blondine. Blondine burst into a fit of laughter.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FISH LANDED.

PUNCTUALLY at the hour appointed Gerald presented himself at the elegant villa in St. John's-wood, and was received by Seraphine, arrayed in the most exquisitely simple of morning-dresses, and looking indescribably captivating.

The expression of her face was serious —almost severe. Her eyes were calm and cold; on her mouth there was not the faintest semblance of a smile. Her attitude was that of a young queen giving audience to one of her subjects lately rebellious, but now become submissive and repentant.

'Oho!' thought Gerald, 'I must mind what I am about; the lovely Seraphine is not to be trifled with;' and he bowed to her

with a respectfulness in which there was a touch of exaggeration, that did not escape the notice of Seraphine.

Motioning him to take a seat, she said:

'I will not beat about the bush, Sir Gerald Dalbright, but come at once to the point, so that you may not for a moment misunderstand the nature of the present interview.'

Gerald bowed, without making any reply.

'Yesterday evening,' she continued, 'you made yourself a party—innocently, I hope—to an act of rudeness committed by Lord Fitzcole. I should be glad to know, that when you were brought to my box, you were not aware that Lord Fitzcole had previously asked permission to introduce you, and that I had refused his request.'

Gerald stammered some sort of inarticulate reply, and the conversation was carried on with subtle artfulness by Seraphine, at each step achieving a new influence over

the mind of her unsuspecting visitor. This conversation there is no need to give at length. By the time it had been continued for half an hour, Seraphine's hauteur had wholly disappeared, and Gerald was placed entirely at his ease.

'I fear I may have been a little too severe towards you in the first heat of my resentment,' she said. 'You must not feel hurt at my refusal to receive you. In this refusal there was, I need hardly assure you, nothing personal. I acted only in accordance with a rule of conduct I have laid down for myself, the nature of which I will frankly explain to you.'

Gerald listened with profound attention, completely under the fascination of her voice, at once soft and penetrating in its quality.

'I am young,' she continued; 'the registry of my birth establishes that fact. My flatterers tell me that I am handsome, and I am too modest to dispute with them

on such a subject. I have lived in that strange world where happiness is constantly sought and never found. I have had my illusions, and lost them — or rather they have rudely deserted me. I have been deceived, and I in my turn have deceived. I have loved—I have suffered; but my life has not been without its lesson. I have learned to value the blessing of calm; and to attain that blessing, I must have done with love.'

'You cannot possibly mean what you say!' cried Gerald, amazed.

'The explanation is very simple,' she replied. 'I loved—really loved, understand me—a young man who was called away from me by family duty to marry a girl with an immense fortune. I loved him too well to be a bar to his success in life. We parted; and that no chance of worldly trouble might hang over me, he generously promised to remit me, through his bankers, one hundred pounds a month, as long as I formed no new connection. From that mo-

ment,' cried Seraphine, 'I have led a life of tranquil enjoyment. I receive my hundred pounds a month with perfect regularity; I am free, void of care or anxiety—happy, in fact. Should I not therefore have been mad not to take the resolution I have taken? I am sure you will agree with me, that I have only done what any other woman in her senses would have done under similar circumstances.'

The charm was complete. Seraphine had spread her net with masterly skill, and now the fish was fairly landed.

After much pleading on his part, she gave him permission to visit at her house daily between the hours of twelve and two; but strictly on condition that he came as a friend, and that, neither by word nor look, was he to attempt to pass from the neutral ground of friendship on to the forbidden territory of love.

As soon as he had left the house, Seraphine rubbed her hands with infinite satis-

faction at the entire success of her strategy. She saw plainly that it needed but a word of hers to induce Gerald to settle upon her a sum even greater than that which she had named as coming to her from her imaginary quondam lover. But though she was greedy, and though Gerald offered himself as an easy and complacent prey, she saw the full advantages of first lulling him into complete unsuspiciousness, as a means of ultimately despoiling him in security.

She held him, so to speak, with a tight bridle, and never permitted him for a moment to overleap the narrow limits of the circle in which she had permitted him to move. With a word, with a look, she imposed silence on him if he tried to put off the mask of respectful friendship which he had agreed to wear; and if ever he appeared to resist, her looks suddenly expressed such real distress that he immediately bowed his head and became once more docile.

At the end of about a fortnight Sera-

phine thought it was time to give new colour to the part she was sustaining, and to bring on the climax of the comedy of which she was the author as well as chief actor.

Little by little and by insensible gradations the habitual expression of her face became modified; a slightly-thoughtful melancholy replaced the look of gaiety and enjoyment in her visage; her mind appeared to grow at once less vivacious and more tender; and sometimes, as if obeying an irresistible attraction, she dwelt upon his face with long and troubled looks. If their eyes met, she turned hers quickly away, and blushed with modest confusion. In short, her object was to suggest to his mind that love was invading her well-guarded heart. And he was not slow to read the signs precisely as she intended them to be read.

A less able and accomplished mistress of the art of deceiving men might have thought precaution and finesse wasted in dealing with a man so ready to be deceived

as Gerald; but Seraphine's scheme was a great one, and every step she took towards its accomplishment was the result of the most careful consideration.

Gerald was a daily visitor at the time agreed upon, and day by day the comedy invented to lure him into a belief that, in spite of herself, love was making inroads upon her heart, was played with consummate skill.

One morning, about six weeks after the date of his first visit to Seraphine's house, he received the following letter:

'My dear Gerald,—When you have read this letter—written in defiance of the dictates of my reason, and almost of my will—you will think me mad or ridiculous, perhaps; but I cannot help it. I know only too well that I have no claim on the compassion of your heart, and I do not complain of the sufferings I now endure. I have forbidden you to love me, and you

have faithfully obeyed my command. I vowed to myself never to love you; I have in vain tried to keep my oath. The fault has been entirely my own. Why did I presume too much upon my strength? Why did I not sooner discover that in admitting you constantly to my presence I was exposing my weak heart to all that is most seductive in man?—for in you, Gerald, are concentrated youth, beauty, riches; your eyes possess the fatal faculty of speaking to a woman's heart, even when your lips are closed. I was mad to dare their power; I see it now, too late! My heart, which I had believed to be dead to love, has returned to life; and, in the first ecstasy of its reawakening, insanely dreamed of a bright future of love and happiness! Vain dream!—impossible vision! I know all. You love another! I have learned her name even—Blondine; a woman more beautiful than I, no doubt. Do not think that I blame you for loving her; but O, Gerald, why did you

ever tell me that you loved me? You have wounded my heart deeply, deeply; but I forgive you. Farewell—for ever. We must never meet again. On my knees I implore you not again to seek to see me. A few hours after you receive this letter, I shall have quitted London. Alas! could I bear to be near you, knowing that another was basking in the sunshine of your love, while all the world is dark to me? The very thought is torment! Farewell! May you be happy! May *she* whom you love love you but half as well as

'SERAPHINE.'

In this artfully-composed epistle it will be seen that Seraphine attacked her victim at every one of his weak points, and the effect which it produced on his mind may easily be imagined. The result it was intended to produce was achieved with the most complete success.

Without a moment's hesitation, Gerald

scribbled a note and drew a cheque for one hundred and fifty pounds—note and cheque he enclosed in an envelope, and addressed it to Blondine. The note conveyed to that young lady the full and entire disposition of her freedom, accompanied by the expression of a thousand good wishes for her future. After posting this formal communication, he jumped into a cab, and was driven at speed to St. John's-wood.

On gaining admittance to the hall of Seraphine's house, that lady's confidential maid met him with looks of admirably-simulated surprise and alarm, and assured him that her mistress was not at home—that she had gone into the country—that she had departed, two hours before, for the Continent—whether to France, Germany, or Italy, she could not say.

But, without giving any heed to the girl's statement, Gerald hurried to the drawing-room, where, dressed in a dainty white robe, her hair in disorder, and her

face buried in her hands, he discovered Seraphine extended upon a sofa.

He threw himself upon his knees beside her. She gently repulsed him. He attempted to justify himself, and to plead his cause. She besought him to spare her, to spare himself. And so the play was acted for three hours. By which time, no doubt, Seraphine found his persuasions irresistible; judging from the fact that he quitted her house with head erect, smiling lip, and altogether the bearing of one who has succeeded in some way according to his desire.

As soon as he reached home he set himself down to the self-imposed task of drawing four promissory-notes. This labour achieved, he wrote the following note:

'Dearest Seraphine,—I know the disinterestedness of your noble heart; but nevertheless suffer me for one moment to refer to a subject to which I shall never again allude. You have sacrificed for me your in-

come of twelve hundred a year; the equivalent of this sum—let what will happen—shall be secured to you. As a guarantee, I now enclose you my promissory-notes to the value of twenty thousand pounds. Need I say that in doing so I place myself in your hands—the loveliest hands, I know, into which I can give my heart and liberty?—Ever your own

'GERALD.'

After having dispatched this note and its valuable contents, Gerald, glowing with inward satisfaction, went to dine with Lord Carleon, to whom, however, he did not venture to boast of his good-fortune, dreading the almost inevitable banter of which he would have been made the recipient.

Later in the evening, he took his permitted place at the feet of his enslaver, his fair silly head resting unsuspectingly upon her knees.

Though the weather was warm, a bright

fire was burning in the grate—quite needlessly, Gerald thought. From the mantelpiece Seraphine took a half-open note, filled with stamped papers. Gerald recognised it instantly. This note and its contents, after tapping him with it playfully on the cheek two or three times, she cast into the fire, where it was rapidly consumed.

'What are you doing?' cried Gerald in astonishment.

'Darling,' she whispered, at the same time bending over him and imprinting a kiss upon his forehead, 'I have your love—that is all I want.'

A few words will explain this act of charming disinterestedness. The stamped papers with which the envelope addressed by Gerald was filled, and which he had seen consumed, were entirely innocent of his signature, the veritable promissory-notes being safely locked-up in a cabinet in Seraphine's boudoir.

To Gerald, however, the act appeared

one of the noblest imaginable, and Seraphine an angel worthy of unending adoration.

It was impossible for Gerald to feel quite sure as to the course Blondine would take under the circumstances of her sudden dismissal. That young lady, however, was not wholly unused to the sort of treatment to which she had thus been subjected, and consequently she took matters very philosophically at first.

Gerald had given her a houseful of splendid furniture, and abundance of jewelry and dresses; all this served to console her. But at the end of a week, the news of Gerald's *liaison* with Seraphine was known to all the bohemian friends of the fair Blondine, whom they at last exasperated with their hypocritical compliments and condolences.

'It's plain the fellow's utterly without taste, to prefer Seraphine to you, my love,' cried one.

'They say she's turned his head, the fool!' cried another; 'that he is spending money on her as if she were a princess.'

'Poor Blondine!—but, at least, nobody can accuse *you* of bringing him to ruin!' cried a third.

The effect of all these friendly sayings was to sting Blondine into angry resentment—not against Gerald, but against her rival. She recalled the look of haughty contempt which Seraphine had cast upon her in the vestibule of the St. James's Theatre, and instantly concluded that Seraphine had robbed her of Gerald in revenge for the mocking laughter with which that contemptuous look had been repaid.

She resolved to be revenged in turn; but for some little time she was unable to determine upon any method that promised to be entirely effectual. At length she had formed a plan that satisfied her, and lost no time in carrying it into execution.

Among several accomplishments which she had picked up, nobody could tell how, was that of riding. She was anything but a bad horsewoman, as scores of park-loungers, to whom she was known, could have testified.

It was the height of the season, and the Park daily presented a scene which is the envy of all the continental capitals. Conspicuous amid the most conspicuous women who there exhibit their beauty as if in a market-place was each afternoon to be seen Seraphine, lying back in a superb open carriage, drawn by a pair of horses an emperor might have coveted. Almost in constant attendance upon her was Gerald on horseback.

On the day on which Blondine had determined to carry out her scheme of vengeance, she had gone to the Park on horseback, and watched for a favourable opportunity. Gerald had left the side of his mistress's carriage, and fallen into talk with

a party of his acquaintances lounging by the side-rail.

Blondine, who was armed with a riding-whip somewhat heavier than the whips ordinarily used by ladies riding in the Park, dashed up to the carriage of her rival.

'Do you know me?' she demanded of Seraphine.

'No,' was the short answer.

'I'll tell you my name, then.'

'That's quite unnecessary, since I've no wish to know it,' replied Seraphine.

'I'll tell it you all the same: it's Blondine.'

'Ah, it's Blondine. And what then?'

'We've an account to settle, ma'am.'

'I don't understand you,' replied Seraphine, beginning to lose confidence. At the same time she called to her coachman, 'John, turn round and drive home, as fast as you can.'

Before the coachman had time to obey the order given him, Blondine replied:

'You have taken off my hands a lover of whom I was getting tired; I owe you something for your services. Now we are quits.'

Quick as lightning she raised her whip and brought it down upon the face of her rival. A moment afterwards she had galloped through the press of vehicles and was out of sight.

Seraphine shrieked. She raised her handkerchief to her face and found that it was stained with blood. The thought flashed upon her mind that she was disfigured, and under the shock of this terrible idea she fainted.

On recovering she found herself at home and Gerald in attendance upon her; and she saw—what was infinitely more consolatory to her—that the injury she had sustained amounted to a very slight abrasion of the chin.

To Gerald the affair was delightful. Two rivals disputing his heart with horsewhips offered to his pride an exquisitely-flattering triumph.

CHAPTER X.

NEW TOILS.

In the mean time Gerald had been presented by Lord Alfred Fitzcole to his sister Lady Elsworth, the quondam schoolfellow and bosom friend of the beautiful Countess of Pentarvon. At the weekly receptions of this lady he had been a constant visitor, and on several occasions had met Lady Pentarvon there. With Lady Elsworth he became quite a favourite; and one of their most frequent topics of conversation was Lady Pentarvon, of whose beauty, goodness, and happy married life she was never tired of talking; the slightest suspicion of danger or impropriety never for a moment crossing her mind.

With Lord Pentarvon Gerald stood on

terms of easy intimacy, such as naturally grows up between two young men, however diverse their tastes and feelings may be, who meet each other frequently in society, at their clubs, and in the public places of fashionable resort.

One evening, about a month later than the date of the admirably-acted scene of the burning of the fictitious promissory-notes, the royal opera was crowded to overflow with one of the most brilliant audiences of the season. The special attraction was the performance of *Le Prophète* with Mario as John of Leyden.

Gerald occupied a stall near the end of the second row, on the right of the house. On the same side Seraphine was the proud possessor of a box on the pit tier. On the grand tier, near the stage on the opposite side, was the Countess of Pentarvon's box. Thus the two women, who, in widely-different degrees, and wholly unconscious of the fact of their strange bringing together,

employed the thoughts of the young libertine, found themselves face to face.

On the present occasion every box and seat in the house was occupied. Gerald was in his stall; Seraphine in her box alone, but enjoying the satisfaction of feeling that her charms were not unnoticed.

Lady Pentarvon, with her husband by her side, was radient with beauty and happiness; and the picture of perfect enjoyment presented by the pair attracted infinite observation and admiration. But among the multitude of spectators whose eyes were turned towards the happy husband and wife, there were two persons who, from different points of view, regarded Lady Pentarvon with like fixity of gaze, but with widely dissimilar feelings.

One of these persons was Gerald; the other was Seraphine.

The moment Lady Pentarvon appeared in her box, Seraphine turned her opera-glass upon the young Countess's radiant

face. She started, as if she had suddenly become the prey of some violent and indefinable emotion. Her hand appeared to tremble, and her eyes flashed, as she continued to gaze through the lenses of her double opera-glass.

As soon as the second act of the opera was over, Gerald left his stall, and went up to the Countess's box, without even noticing the presence of Seraphine.

Lord Pentarvon shook his hand cordially. He bowed to the Countess, and exchanged with her and her husband a few of the insignificant commonplaces which are accepted in society as the current coin of ordinary conversation, and, at the end of five minutes, retired.

The effect produced upon Seraphine by this visit to Lady Pentarvon's box was remarkable in the extreme. Once more the expression of her face underwent a complete change. She appeared almost delighted. An observer might have said that she had

suddenly experienced some great relief of mind—that she had at length, after long searching for it in vain, discovered the answer to some perplexing enigma. For the first time since the entrance of the Countess of Pentarvon into her box, she laid down her opera-glass, and smiled.

A few minutes later Gerald sauntered into her box, and seated himself behind her, keeping himself well in the shade. On seeing him enter, Seraphine made a little gesture with her lips, expressive of impatience.

'What's the matter?' he asked in a careless tone.

'What *should* be the matter?' she replied.

'I shouldn't ask you if I knew.'

'Well—nothing is the matter.'

'So much the better; only, seeing how confoundedly put-out you look, it isn't very easy to imagine.'

There were a few moments' silence, during which Gerald yawned.

'My dear Gerald,' said Seraphine at length, 'do you suppose you are making life very amusing to me at present?'

'By Jove! it seems to me—'

She interrupted him with,

'To-day, for example—do you think I have much to thank you for? You promised to come for me to take me to the Park.'

'I was prevented. Lord Carleon took me with him to look at a horse a fellow wants him to buy.'

'That is to say, you prefer your friend's society, and the quality of his horses, to any claims of mine.'

'You can't really believe that.'

'More—I am perfectly sure of it. This evening again, you leave me here alone, and go about the house paying visits without even troubling yourself to come and say three words to me.'

'Of what visits are you speaking?'

'O, don't pretend you don't know! To the people in the box yonder!'

She indicated with her fan the box of Lady Pentarvon.

'Oho!' thought Gerald; 'she's jealous of having seen me speak to a woman prettier than herself!'

How profoundly wrong he was in this estimate of Seraphine's motives will presently be made manifest.

'I was beginning to think,' she continued, 'you did not intend even to do me the honour of coming to wish me good-evening.'

'You see how you have misjudged me,' he replied.

Again there was a short silence, broken as before by Seraphine.

'Was the gentleman you were just now speaking to the husband of the lady he is sitting by?'

'Yes.'

'What's his name?'

'Lord Pentarvon.'

'Is he one of your friends?'

'I should rather say one of my acquaintances.'

'What do you think of his wife?'

'O, she's not bad-looking,' replied Gerald, with affected indifference.

'Not bad-looking indeed!' cried Seraphine; 'why, man, she's lovely. I have never set eyes on another woman who could bear comparison with her.'

'Not even yourself?' asked Gerald, laughing.

'It is only ugliness that has the right to be jealous of beauty,' she replied.

'Then,' cried Gerald, '*you* never have been, and never will be, jealous.'

'Enough of such compliments. Let us return to the subject of this lady.'

'By Jove, I'm puzzled to account for the interest you seem to take in her!' he replied.

'I too am surprised,' said Seraphine;

'but, without being able to explain to myself why, I feel a sort of greedy curiosity to know all about her. What was her name before she was married? Do you happen to have heard?'

'Yes; she was the daughter of Sir Everard Poynton.'

'I was sure I could not be mistaken!' cried Seraphine to herself. 'Has she been long married?' she inquired aloud.

'About a year and a half.'

'Does she love her husband?'

'With enthusiasm.'

'What sort of man is he?'

'A very good sort of fellow, I daresay; but slow, and altogether unfitted for the kind of life he's leading at present—and which he leads only to please his wife, I fancy.'

'Is he rich?'

'I believe so.'

'Is he jealous?'

'He has nothing to make him so.'

'It will come.'

'How?'

'Through his wife, who, whether she wishes it or not, will before long see herself besieged by adorers, against whom the fury of her husband will naturally launch itself without hesitation.'

'By Jove! it's not impossible.'

'It's certain. Are you a visitor at their house?'

'I go there sometimes,' he replied, in a half-evasive tone.

'You mean, you go there very often,' said Seraphine, looking straight into his face with a penetrating gaze.

'You are wrong, I assure you,' he replied, with ill-concealed embarrassment.

'Be frank with me, Gerald.'

'Well—so I am,' he stammered.

'Confess, then, that you sometimes pay a little court to Lady Pentarvon?'

'Nothing of the sort—I pledge you my

word,' cried Gerald, blushing to the whites of his eyes.

Seraphine pretended not to perceive the evident disturbance of mind produced by her questions.

'O,' she cried, 'there would have been no great harm done if you had. Trust me, I know what men are, and they are all alike; put the gravest of them alongside of a pretty young woman, and an hour will not have passed before he has stammered half-a-dozen vows of love into her ear. Fortunately for the world, such affairs go for nothing.'

Gerald was not to be seduced into a confession, however; but obstinately denied the fact suggested by Seraphine, who at last permitted him to believe that he had succeeded in convincing her.

CHAPTER XI.

DEMON AND ANGEL.

THREE o'clock was striking one afternoon, a few weeks after the occurrence of the conversation detailed in the preceding chapter. Seraphine was in her dressing-room preparing for her daily drive in the Park, when Gerald entered the room without the ceremony of a previous announcement.

A cloud was upon his face. He munched the end of his cigar in evident ill-humour, and tapped the toe of one of his varnished boots with nervous impatience. Throwing himself into an easy-chair, he pitched his hat down upon the carpet, and crossed his legs almost savagely.

'O, it's you,' remarked Seraphine, still going on with her toilette.

'It was hardly worth the trouble of opening your mouth to make that remark,' said Gerald sharply.

'Do you know, my dear Gerald, you have a truly refined way of entering a lady's dressing-room?'

Gerald returned no answer, but shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

'Does it not sometimes occur to you that you exhibit anything but good manners?'

'If my manners are bad, so much the worse for those whom they may happen to displease,' replied Gerald.

'What if they displease *me?*' asked Seraphine.

'I don't know that that would appear to me a sufficient reason for changing them.'

'Better and better! Having ceased to be polite, you naturally become coarse.'

Gerald silently shrugged his shoulders for the second time.

'Coarse as a vulgar street-boy,' added

Seraphine, with the greatest calmness of voice and manner.

Gerald blushed slightly, and looked hard at her.

'O,' he said, 'I see. You wish to pick a quarrel. Well, so much the better; a row with you will be a change, at all events, and serve to turn my attention in a new direction.'

He crossed his arms on his chest, as if to await the outburst of the storm and to defy it. Once more, he was mistaken. The storm did not come; but Seraphine, instead of turning angrily upon him, as perhaps she had the right of doing, looked into his face with an expression of almost tender compassion.

'My poor friend,' she said, 'you are bored?'

'Horribly!' replied Gerald.

'And, most of all, *here?*'

Gerald, who was thoroughly out of tem-

per and really wished to bring about a quarrel, replied:

'Yes, certainly; above all *here*.'

Seraphine smiled.

'That's frank, at all events,' she said. After a moment's silence, she added, 'I was on the point of going out as you came in.'

'Go now,' he muttered.

Seraphine rang a bell, and her waiting-woman speedily appeared at the door in answer to the summons.

'Tell John to take the carriage back to the stables,' she said, at the same time putting off her bonnet.

'What do you mean by that?' demanded Gerald.

'I shall not drive out this afternoon,' said Seraphine to the servant, who immediately disappeared to execute her mistress's order.

'What does this mean?'

'It means simply that I am not going out this afternoon.'

'Why not?'

'I prefer to stay at home and keep you company.'

'You are a great fool for your pains, then!' cried Gerald.

'That is of no consequence. Besides, the pleasure of being near you cannot, in any case, appear to me in the light of a *sacrifice*.'

'Very touching, I daresay,' cried Gerald ironically; 'but, nevertheless, I should advise you to have your horses brought out again, because I have no intention of availing myself of your extreme benevolence.'

'No?' said Seraphine blandly.

'No,' he replied, rising, after having picked-up his hat, and moving a few paces towards the door.

Seraphine's patience was unconquerable. She laid two fingers of her right hand gently on his arm, and this was sufficient to retain him.

'What do you want?' he demanded.

'I want you to stay,' she answered, 'for five minutes only.'

'What for?'

'I want to talk with you.'

Gerald threw himself back into the chair he had quitted, and with insolent impatience pulled out his watch.

'You want five minutes?' he said. 'Very well, I'll give you just so long, but not a minute longer. So, if you really have anything to say to me, lose no time in saying it.'

'You are feeling horribly bored, you said just now, and without your saying so, I could have told as much from the expression of your face, added to your ill-temper. I'll tell you why you are bored.'

'You'll tell me what I don't know myself, then,' he replied, looking at his watch.

'Very possibly. You are feeling horribly bored, my dear Gerald, because you

are in love, and wholly unsuccessful in your suit.'

Gerald sprang to his feet.

'You are mad!' he cried. 'If that's all you have to tell me—'

Without paying any attention to this interruption, Seraphine continued:

'You are in love with Lady Pentarvon, to whose house you go every day; and your present ill-temper arises from the fact that this afternoon she has once more declined to see you.'

Gerald stared at her in a state of almost comic stupefaction. The details she had just given him were true to the minutest particular. How had she been able so completely and so rapidly to make herself mistress of these facts? Gerald had driven straight from Lord Pentarvon's house in Berkeley-square to St. John's-wood. If Seraphine had spoken only at hazard, chance had wonderfully aided her.

It was her turn to smile somewhat

mockingly. She pointed with her finger to the clock upon the mantelpiece, and said,

'The five minutes you were good enough to spare me have expired; I'll not detain you any longer.'

'Before I leave you,' cried Gerald, 'I insist on your explaining what you mean by this absurd story of my visits to Lady Pentarvon—a fabrication from first to last.'

Seraphine crossed the room and unlocked a small cabinet of satin-wood, from one of the drawers of which she took a memorandum-book.

'I'll spare you the necessity of making a number of perfectly-useless denials,' she said, 'by proving to you in an instant that I am perfectly informed as to your least actions in regard to Lady Pentarvon.'

She opened the book and read:

'MONDAY: Gerald went to Berkeley-square at two o'clock. He was received. TUESDAY: At a quarter-past two. He was not received. WEDNESDAY: Same hour as

yesterday. Received. THURSDAY: At three o'clock. Door shut. FRIDAY: Same hour. Received.'

Seraphine closed the book.

'Here I have the history of your visits for a week,' she said. 'To-day, as I said before, you have presented yourself at the accustomed hour and found the door shut. Is that true or not?'

Gerald did not attempt to deny it. Of what use would it have been to do so? Besides, what did it matter to him, however perfectly Seraphine was informed of the assiduity of his visits to the house of Lord and Lady Pentarvon? He was eagerly desirous, however, of ascertaining by what means she had made herself so perfectly acquainted with his doings.

'Have you a secret police at your command?' he said.

'Precisely,' she replied; 'and, most curiously, it is you yourself who are so kind as always to bring me their reports.'

'I!' he cried, in astonishment.

'Would you like to know how? Take off your coat.'

'Take off my coat!' he repeated in bewilderment; 'in the name of all that's absurd, for what purpose?'

'Take off your coat.'

Gerald did as he was directed, and Seraphine spread the coat over the back of a chair.

'Look!' she said.

Gerald looked, and in the centre of the back of his coat discovered a small cross in white chalk.

'What does that mean?' he cried.

'It means,' replied Seraphine, 'that a man, employed by me for the purpose, has daily placed himself in the immediate neighbourhood of your idol's house, and whenever you have been received there, he has marked two small crosses on your back with the tip of his cane—one cross only when, as has happened to-day, you have

not been admitted to Lady Pentarvon's presence.'

There was a moment's silence, broken by Gerald, who seemed brought back to good-humour as if by enchantment.

'My dear Seraphine,' he cried, 'I admit that your police does its work admirably; but nevertheless I maintain that, in spite of all their information, your jealousy is totally without foundation.'

'My jealousy!' cried Seraphine; 'stop there, if you please! To be jealous, one must be in love; and it is some little time since I was in love with you, my dear Gerald.'

'I thank you for this interesting piece of information,' replied Gerald somewhat bitterly.

'It leaves you in no doubt as to my frankness. You loved me, or thought you did—or, at all events, said you did—and I gave myself to you. You now love another woman, and I will give *her* to you.'

Gerald started.

'I don't understand you,' he said.

'I'll explain myself more clearly. Lady Pentarvon, with whom you are in love like a fool or like a green boy, whose finger-tips at this moment you hardly dare touch, shall within three months accept you as her lover, if you will confide in me. Is that plain to your understanding?'

'Too plain,' he replied. 'It warns me that you are laying some snare for me.'

'What should I gain by that?' she asked.

'I don't know. But I also may ask, what have you to gain by sacrificing your *amour propre* in favour of a rival, and to aid one who has been your lover—who in point of fact is so still?'

'My answer is simple,' replied Seraphine, her eyes flashing with unwonted light. 'I am one of those women whom society affects to despise; a woman held to be of no account even by the men who

lyingly profess to love her. The Countess of Pentarvon, on the contrary, without any merit except the negative one of having been born at the top of the social ladder, is environed by the esteem and respect of all —even of men like yourself, who do not believe in the existence of virtue in a woman.

'Well,' she continued, 'I wish this great lady to be brought down to my level—to accept the dregs of *your* love! Every time that opportunity serves me, I thus avenge myself on society, that has always shown itself infamously unjust and cruel towards me. To bring about the fall of the proud Countess of Pentarvon is a part of my sworn vengeance.'

'Seraphine,' he said, smiling, 'you are a demon, my dear.'

'And the business of demons is to drag down the angels, is it not?' she asked.

'Unquestionably.'

'You believe me now, then?'

'Perfectly.'

'And will you place yourself in my hands?'

'Blindly.'

'I will keep my promise, then; be certain of it. But first there are some things with which I must be made acquainted. Tell me, in detail, all you know about Lady Pentarvon and her husband; and especially all that has passed between you and them since you saw them for the first time.'

'It will not take long to do that,' Gerald replied.

He then related to her all that had happened from the night of Lady Rosethorn's ball to the moment at which he was speaking. Seraphine listened attentively to his recital, and more than once a smile passed over her features.

'So then,' she inquired, 'the Countess really loves her husband?'

'Enthusiastically; as I told you at the

opera, the night you questioned me,' he replied.

'A happy circumstance for you!' she cried.

'Happy!'

'Happy; for she is unattackable on every side but the one on which she appears to you the most completely defended. On that one side she is open to attack—to the all-powerful attack of jealousy!'

'But she is not jealous.'

'She will become so.'

'Impossible! Her husband lives but for her.'

Seraphine tapped the carpet impatiently with her foot.

'Where are your wits?' she cried. 'Do you not see, that to win Lady Pentarvon, it is not she but her husband who has to be won?'

Gerald stood as speechless as if he had been suddenly struck dumb with astonishment.

For more than two hours the conversation was continued between Gerald and the diabolically astute Seraphine, who charged his profoundly vicious but shallow mind with counsels which he was only too ready to obey with blind fidelity. The results of his fatal docility had not long to be waited for.

CHAPTER XII.

FIRST RESULTS OF THE PLOT.

Lord Pentarvon, possessed by the noble instinct which induces good men to attempt to better the condition of others less happily endued than themselves, had resolved to endeavour to effect a moral cure of his friend Gerald. Lord Carleon, as we have seen, had made the same attempt and failed. In Lord Carleon's case, to fail was simply to fail; but in the case of Lord Pentarvon the attempt was fraught with danger; with danger against which, being unseen and unsuspected, he had no defence.

Feeling for Gerald a warm regard, and deeply regretting to see him given up to a life of idleness and profligacy, he had earnestly taken on himself the task of reforming the young man's morals; but to do this

effectually, it was necessary he should become his frequent companion. It followed that he found himself becoming day by day the intimate of Gerald's dissolute associates.

At first he felt himself completely out of his own proper sphere in this society, the language and manners of which appeared to him altogether anomalous; but in which, by degrees, he began to find a certain novelty and charm; until at length the elegant corruption of this gilded bohemianism had taken firm hold, if not actually of his heart, at least of his mind. The brilliant and immoral paradoxes which he heard continually repeated, seemed less odious than before; the witty and ingenious vice with which he became familiarised no longer inspired him with wholesome repugnance.

He himself was unmindful of the change which was being wrought in his character; not so his wife. For the first time in her married life, a cloud, felt rather than seen,

had overshadowed her perfect happiness; a sense of uneasiness, of undefinable dread, had come upon her. A presentiment of misfortune haunted her mind.

She had seen with wonderment the growing partiality of her husband for the society of Gerald; a young man whose notorious laxity of conduct she knew her husband would have regarded, at the least, with disdainful compassion only a few weeks before; of whose growing influence she was now at once jealous and alarmed.

Lord Pentarvon's whole manner of life appeared to be changed; he who had hitherto found the society of his beautiful young wife as necessary to his happiness and comfort as the air he breathed, passed most of his time away from her side. The change was inexpressibly bitter to Lady Pentarvon.

At last the moment arrived when it seemed to her that to endure longer in silence was to abandon all hope of remedy.

'I cannot bear to live in this dreadful state of mind,' she said to herself. 'He loves me still—thank heaven I am sure of that!—and if we were away from this terrible London, with its thousand false pleasures and seductions, he would again be all my own! I will this evening tell him that I pine for the tranquil delights of our country home, and he will not refuse me.'

The day on which she formed this tender resolution, she had not seen her husband since breakfast. He had promised to return home at noon, but when the dinner-hour had arrived, he was still absent. At half-past seven, however, he dismounted from his horse, which was covered with foam, and hurried to his wife's sitting-room.

He looked bright and animated, and kissed his wife affectionately, but without noticing that her eyes were red with recent weeping.

'Order them to serve dinner at once,

my love, for I'm dying of hunger.' These were the first words he addressed to her.

They passed into the dining-room, and the dinner was instantly served. When the cloth was removed, and the servants had left the room, Lady Pentarvon asked in a gentle tone,

'What have you been doing all day, Henry?'

'I've been in the saddle nearly all day with Dalbright at a steeple-chase, a few miles out of town,' he replied.

'Why did you not let me know you were going? I might then have gone in a carriage and been with you.'

'I did not let you know, because I did not know myself that I was going till I met Dalbright at the club with Fitzcole, Fordwick, and some others, who were just starting.'

'Have you been amused?'

'Thoroughly; only the day appeared too short.'

'Did it!' cried Lady Pentarvon with involuntary bitterness, which, however, was not perceived by her husband.

'And what have *you* been doing, my dear Blanche? You said something about going out shopping, I think; have you been?'

'No, I have not been out to-day; and the hours which have appeared so short to you have appeared to me very long indeed.'

'But how is it you have not been out?'

'Can you ask me, Henry?'

'Certainly I can; why?'

'Because—the reason I have not been out is that I was waiting for your return.'

'Did I promise to return early?'

'You see, you do not even remember to have done so.'

'And that is your only reason for having kept at home all day?'

'Was not that a sufficient reason?'

'By no means a sufficient reason. Promises are often made on the subject of

wholly unimportant matters, the fulfilment of which in an absolute manner no one should seriously count on. You have no more right to be astonished at my want of exactitude than I should have had the right to be surprised if I had happened to return early in the day and found you absent from home.'

Lady Pentarvon gazed at her husband in manifest bewilderment, unable to utter a word in reply. He continued:

'Can you not understand, my dear Blanche, that it is no more to be desired that the husband should be the slave of his wife than that the wife should be the slave of her husband?'

'Is it slavery, then, for you to sacrifice a pleasure for my sake?' she stammered.

'No, certainly not,' he replied; 'and every time you ask of me a sacrifice of this kind, you will find me ready to make it. But what would be veritable slavery would be the being no longer master of my time

and actions. It would be an absurd subjection to be obliged to return home at a fixed hour, on pain of feeling that I am waited for with impatience or anxiety, and the certainty, in case I chanced to be late, of finding at home a wife with a heavy heart and a look of suffering on her face.'

While speaking thus, Lord Pentarvon looked more closely at his wife than he had hitherto done. Suddenly his brows were knit into a frown and a cloud gathered upon his forehead.

'You have been crying?' he said abruptly.

She did not immediately answer, and he repeated the question with a kind of severity.

'Yes,' she replied at length, 'it is true; I have been crying.'

He stamped angrily on the floor, then rose from the table and paced the room for three or four seconds. He now suddenly became calm, and, taking her head between

his hands, with a sort of half-smiling indulgence, kissed her forehead.

'You are like all beings too completely happy; you make for yourself cares and griefs, which heaven has spared you. Tell me, my love,' he added, as he resumed his seat, 'what are your plans for this evening?'

These words were spoken in a tone which clearly implied, 'Enough of this; let us turn to some other subject, if you please.'

'I propose to remain at home,' she replied, repressing by a great effort the tears which mounted to her eyes.

'Do you expect any visitors?'

'None.'

'You are looking forward to passing the evening alone, then?'

'That depends upon you, Henry,' she replied in a low and almost suppliant tone.

'On me?' he inquired.

'I want you to devote this evening to me.'

'What you ask, my dear Blanche, is difficult—not to say impossible.'

'Impossible, Henry!'

'Very nearly. I have an appointment for this evening which it would be highly objectionable in me not to keep.'

'An appointment! With whom?'

'With Dalbright.'

'Again that man!' she exclaimed bitterly.

'Why,' cried Lord Pentarvon in astonishment, 'I thought you and he were excellent friends.'

'Excellent friends? I detest him,' she replied vehemently.

'On what account?'

'Since he has been your inseparable companion, *I* have no longer been anything to you!' she cried.

'No longer anything to me!' murmured Lord Pentarvon; and in a tone of tender sadness, 'my dear Blanche, is it possible you think as you say?'

'I not only think it, but the thought has caused me bitter suffering.'

'But, my love, this is sheer folly,' he said. 'Calm yourself, and do not doubt my heart, which has always been yours alone, and will be for ever yours.'

Lady Pentarvon rose from her seat and threw her arms about his neck.

'If I am still as dear as ever to you, Henry,' she said, 'you will not refuse to prove it to me.'

'In what manner?'

'By making a sacrifice for me. Do not keep your appointment this evening with Sir Gerald Dalbright, but stay at home with me.'

Once more Lord Pentarvon's brows were knit into a frown, and his wife shrank from his stern look in alarm; but the smile quickly returned to his features, and he replied cheerfully,

'So be it; but you must not again doubt my love for you.'

'I shall be too happy to believe it, Henry, to give way to doubt.'

'It is now half-past eight,' he said, consulting his watch, 'and my appointment was for half-past nine o'clock. I'll write a line to Dalbright, telling him not to expect me, and send it by one of the servants.'

'Thanks, dearest,' she cried, seizing one of his hands and pressing it to her lips; but he drew his hand away and pressed her fondly to his bosom. All her happiness seemed to return with the loving pressure of her husband's embrace.

Arm-in-arm they went up to the drawing-room, and there Lord Pentarvon wrote the promised note and threw it upon the mantelpiece. He then seated himself beside her on a sofa and encircled her waist with his arm, placing her head tenderly upon his shoulder.

'Now, let us chat,' he said pleasantly.

'Will you not first send off the note you have written?' she inquired.

'Half an hour hence will do for that,' he replied.

Two or three minutes were passed in silence, and then, arming herself with all the courage she could command, Lady Pentarvon said,

'Look me in the face, Henry, and then tell me frankly whether you do not observe a change in its expression.'

'Change!—none—or at least only that you are looking perhaps a little paler than usual; but it is so slight that I should hardly have noticed it.'

'If I look pale, there is sufficient reason for it; I have suffered a good deal lately.'

'Suffered, my dear Blanche!'

'Yes, with an indefinable uneasiness of mind and body. I am preyed on by a vague sadness, against the depressing influence of which I strive in vain.'

'I know what is the matter—and the sovereign remedy!' he cried. 'You are being preyed upon by Ennui, my dear

Blanche; and I take shame to myself for not having stood between you and so intolerable a persecutor. But from this very day he shall be exorcised; your distractions shall be so many, that, if he ventures to return, he will find his place occupied by Pleasure, and fly away from your presence vanquished for ever.'

Kind as they were intended to be, these words sent a thrill of pain through Lady Pentarvon's heart; for they told her how little she was understood by her husband.

'It is not that, Henry,' she said sadly; 'it is not from ennui I am suffering, and the remedy you propose will do me no good.'

'Indeed!' he said.

'Believe me,' she replied, 'the only remedy that will be of any avail is to take me away from London.'

'You want to leave London!' he cried, with an expression of such complete sur-

prise as almost implied that he had not thoroughly understood the sense of the words addressed to him.

'Yes, I want to leave London,' she repeated.

'Good heavens!' he cried; 'and where do you wish to go?'

'Back to Pentarvon.'

'What, immediately?'

'To-morrow, if it were possible to do so,' she answered feverishly.

'Leave London in the middle of June—in the very midst of the season!'

'For that very reason, Henry.'

'You cannot think of such a thing!' he cried. 'It is utterly unreasonable.'

'You refuse me, then?'

'Ask anything else of me, but do not ask me to do what I cannot for a moment think of doing.'

'Why not, Henry?'

'Because if I were now to humour you in a fancy so wholly senseless, before a week

was passed you yourself would blame me for letting you have your way.'

'Try me,' she cried, with tearful pleading.

'I cannot,' he replied.

'I beg of you, Henry!'

'Do not insist, my dear Blanche. It pains me to deny you anything, but this I *must* deny you.'

'You are cruel—very cruel,' she cried.

'No; but I feel that I am right, and that I am acting for your good.'

'What is there in London that so strongly binds you to it, Henry?'

'What motives have you for so strongly desiring to be away from London?' he asked, instead of answering his wife's question.

'I have already told you that here I languish,' she replied.

'And I have told you I will see that you shall enjoy more pleasures.'

'Henry, Henry!' she cried in tones of anguish, 'I desire no pleasure but that of

being away from a place in which my heart is daily dying. I cannot, I *will* not remain in London!'

'You can scarcely have comprehended the meaning of your words before giving utterance to them. *My* fixed intention is not to leave London.'

'O Henry!' she cried, 'you never before spoke to me in such a tone, because you have always loved me.'

'I love you now, my dear Blanche, as fondly as I have ever loved you; but all the more on that account I must not give way to a caprice so entirely unreasonable; for to do so would not be love but unpardonable weakness.'

'In the name of our past tenderness,' she pleaded, 'in the name of my peace of mind, of my happiness, Henry—'

Lord Pentarvon rose angrily.

'Once more I tell you *no!*' he cried; 'and beg you not to try my patience farther.'

Lady Pentarvon covered her face with

her hands, and her tears fell through her trembling fingers.

'Tears now, of course,' he cried; 'it only needed that!' He paced the room a few seconds, and then stopped before his still bitterly weeping wife. 'Blanche,' he continued, in a short determined tone of voice, 'I believe that up to the present time we have enjoyed perfect happiness together.'

'Yes—O yes,' she murmured.

'It appears, however, that you have grown tired of its continuance, and have determined to bring about its destruction,' he went on; 'but so far as it lies in me to prevent your doing this, I shall do all I can to guard against the wreck of our youthful days. It appears that I have been entirely wrong in my estimate of your character. I imagined you to be more intelligent and in most ways better than the generality of women, who are little more than pretty brainless dolls. I have been deceived.

'What has now happened,' he continued,

'is a lesson to me, and teaches me that, like the most foolish of your sex, you are ready to stake the happiness of your home against the accomplishment of the silliest caprice that at any moment takes possession of your mind. It is a great misfortune, but I shall know how to deal with it; and you may rest assured that, as I have refused you to-day, I shall always firmly refuse any and every like foolish request you may make to me.'

As he spoke the last disdainful sentence, Lord Pentarvon took up the note he had written to Gerald and tore it in fragments, which he threw into the fireplace. This done, he walked towards the door.

Lady Pentarvon sprang from her seat in terror, and intercepted his passage from the room.

'O, where are you going?' she cried.

'What is that to you?' he replied.

'Do not go out, Henry!' she cried, with a wildly beseeching gesture.

'Enough of all this, my dear Blanche,' he said, putting her aside gently but firmly. 'It is nearly half-past nine o'clock; Sir Gerald Dalbright is expecting me; and, I tell you frankly, your behaviour this evening is not at all of a kind to induce me to give up any pleasure on your account.'

He left the room without another word, and a few minutes later was out of the house.

With a low cry of agony Lady Pentarvon staggered back to her seat.

'All is over—I abandon hope!' she sobbed. 'Farewell my dreams, my bright dreams of eternal tenderness and happiness. He no longer loves me—he no longer loves me! O heaven, what is to follow?'

CHAPTER XIII.

AN ANONYMOUS LETTER.

During the afternoon of the day following the occurrence of the scene described in the preceding chapter, Gerald and Lord Pentarvon met at one of the clubs of which they were members. Lord Pentarvon recurred to the subject of his friend's irregular mode of life, and sought to convince him by a thousand serious arguments that, far from finding happiness in it, it did not even bring him pleasure.

'My dear fellow,' replied Gerald, 'forgive me for interrupting your flow of eloquence, but really you speak of women—of these exceptional women, that is—as a blind man speaks of colours; in other words, your notions about them are com-

pletely erroneous, from your having made your observations only from a distance, and that through the medium of your austere morality. In short, you know nothing about them.'

'I have no wish to know anything about them,' cried Lord Pentarvon.

'I have nothing to say against your taking that view of the matter; only then you must not pretend to pass judgment on a subject into which you decline even to inquire. For my part, I assure you that among these women, whom you venture to condemn, there are some a great deal better than you suppose them to be.'

'My dear Gerald, you make yourself the advocate of a very bad cause.'

'I only defend these poor women against your wholly unjust prepossessions.'

'Unjust!'

'Clearly, I think; since you condemn them without evidence.'

'I am but the interpreter of reason and truth.'

'I can prove to you that you are, on the contrary, the supporter of intolerance and error,' cried Gerald.

'I am curious, I own, to see how you will be able to do that,' replied Lord Pentarvon.

'Nothing is more easy. I will give you the means of making yourself acquainted with the cause; and, as I have the most perfect confidence in your right-mindedness and the clearness of your perceptions, I promise you that, after you have practically qualified yourself to form a correct judgment, I will follow your advice, and for ever renounce the sort of life you think so objectionable, if your present opinion has not been modified.'

'What do you mean exactly by what you have just said?' inquired Lord Pentarvon.

'I mean to say,' replied Gerald, 'that I

will this evening introduce you at the house of a charming woman in whom I take a good deal of interest.'

Lord Pentarvon made an abrupt movement, and answered quickly,

'I can't think of such a thing.'

'Why not?' asked Gerald in a tone of affected surprise.

'Remember, I am married,' replied Lord Pentarvon.

'What the deuce has that to do with it!' cried Gerald, with a laugh. 'Don't be alarmed, my dear fellow. Seraphine will treat your shyness with the profoundest respect. Your virtue will have nothing to fear in her society, I pledge you my word.'

'That was not what I meant,' said Lord Pentarvon. 'What I meant was, that if Lady Pentarvon were to learn that I had allowed myself—'

'But of whom could she learn anything about the subject?' demanded Gerald quickly. 'Besides, I don't know what harm

she could find in the fact of your having gone with me to supper where a lady—a friend of mine—happened accidentally to be one of the party. Remember also, my dear Pentarvon, that my conversion may depend upon the event.'

In this tone the conversation was continued for a considerable length of time, and ended at last in Lord Pentarvon's agreeing — not without much hesitation and some little remorse — to accompany Gerald to supper at Seraphine's house.

Half an hour after this arrangement was made, Gerald was in the presence of the arch-mover of this wicked scheme. His air was triumphant.

Seraphine was lying negligently upon a sofa, over which was thrown an exquisitely-dressed leopard-skin with golden claws. Observing Gerald's animated look, she rose from her recumbent position, and inquired almost eagerly,

'Well?'

'I've news for you!' he cried.

'Good or bad?'

'Excellent! Do I look as if I were the bearer of anything but good news?'

'No,' she replied. 'Well, what is it?'

'You must give a supper to-night.'

'To whom?'

'To Lord Pentarvon.'

Seraphine sprang to her feet as if she had been moved by some powerful mechanism.

'Is this really true?' she cried.

'Nothing can possibly be truer.'

'He won't alter his mind?'

'I'll answer for that. Esther and Lotti must be put under arms.'

'Leave them to me,' replied Seraphine. 'But how, in the name of all that's wonderful, have you contrived to overcome the scruples of your rigid friend?'

'By the exercsie of a little cleverness, that's all,' answered Gerald, with a highly-satisfied air.

She made him give her all the details of his successful discussion with Lord Pentarvon; and when she had made herself mistress of the facts, proceeded without an instant's hesitation, to instruct him in the farther conduct of her detestable plot. Under her dictation he wrote in a thoroughly disguised hand, the following note, addressed to Lady Pentarvon:

'MADAM,—Do not expect your husband; he will not return home to-night.'

This note he posted on his way to the club, where he had arranged to dine with Lord Pentarvon, before going with him to the opera, and ultimately to Seraphine's house.

At dinner Lord Pentarvon endeavoured to appear gay, but in this attempt he was far from successful. In spite of himself, he constantly relapsed into fits of silent thoughtfulness, and it was easy to see that he did violence to his feelings in struggling

to sustain the lively tone given to the conversation by Gerald, who was in high spirits.

'My dear fellow,' cried Gerald at last, 'if you will forgive me for saying it, you look horribly down in the mouth. Nothing unpleasant happened since we parted, I hope?'

'Nothing in the world,' replied Lord Pentarvon.

'What's the matter with you, then?'

'With me? nothing.'

'O, I know your ordinary look, and I'm happy to tell you it isn't a bit like that which your face is wearing at this moment.'

'Perhaps,' replied Lord Pentarvon. 'Shall I tell you frankly?'

'I wish you would, my dear fellow.'

'Something is worrying me,' replied Lord Pentarvon; 'a regret.'

'On what account?'

'My having made you a promise, the fulfilment of which I beg you will not exact.'

'The devil!' thought Gerald; 'and I fancied he was secured. It appears I was mistaken.' Then he added aloud: 'My dear Pentarvon, I really don't know what you are alluding to.'

'To the proposed supper of this evening.'

'Well, what of it?'

'You must let me off,' replied Lord Pentarvon.

'For what reason?'

'My dear Dalbright, what would be the use of my giving you reasons which appear excellent to me, but which you would consider worthless? Think me ridiculous if you like; but release me from my promise. You know my wife; and you know as well as myself that she deserves all my respect, all my adoration. Well, right or wrong as I may be, it seems to me that to accompany you this evening would be to do her a grievous injustice.'

Gerald made a gesture, as if to interrupt Lord Pentarvon; but the latter went on

without allowing him to pronounce a single word.

'I know what you are going to tell me,' he said; 'that Lady Pentarvon will never know of my being at this supper. But what of that? *I* shall be none the less blamable because what I have done is not found out.'

On hearing Lord Pentarvon talk in this way, Gerald at once saw that he must make a bold stroke to have a chance of regaining the ground he had lost. The expression of his face suddenly changed, and he spoke in a tone that harmonised well with the transformation wrought in his looks.

'O, my dear Pentarvon,' he said ironically, 'it is plain that I did not understand the bearings of the truly frightful proposition I had the imprudence to make to you. The idea never entered my head, I own, that in taking you to a house where I am a constant visitor, I was taking you to a place the very contact of which would do

you infinite harm! I ask ten thousand pardons. I have offended quite through ignorance. Pray consider yourself released from your very dangerous promise.'

Lord Pentarvon looked at him with sad astonishment.

'Have I really hurt your feelings, Dalbright?' he cried.

'There is no use in denying the fact,' replied Gerald; 'you certainly *have* — deeply!'

'My dear Dalbright,' cried Lord Pentarvon, 'I assure you nothing could have been farther from my intention. Forgive me, my dear fellow, and give me your hand in token of sincere and complete forgetfulness. I see that I have been wrong to indulge in such scruples. I will go with you this evening.'

'That's right,' cried Gerald, extending his hand, which Lord Pentarvon shook warmly; 'now you are yourself again!'

The dinner, which had flagged in its

progress during the continuance of this discussion, was now finished with the gaiety with which it had been commenced. Following the programme arranged by them earlier in the day, the two friends went to the opera, and about midnight reached Seraphine's house.

More than once in the course of the evening Lord Pentarvon was oppressed by a return of the feelings which had induced him to endeavour to release himself from his engagement to Gerald; but he drove away the thoughts that troubled him, and nothing in his appearance awakened suspicion in Gerald's mind.

Many times the question occurred to him, what excuse he should be able to offer his wife for passing a large portion of the night away from home: 'A few games of whist at the club, prolonged unconscious of the hour;' he hoped that this explanation would suffice. But even while he formed this hope, he felt faint with shame.

Since her acquaintance with Gerald, Seraphine had newly furnished her 'elegant villa' with sumptuous care. As he passed through one of the rooms that led to the boudoir in which she received her guests, Lord Pentarvon could not refrain from admiring the striking richness and completeness of all that met his eye; and the thought crossed his mind, that for Lady Pentarvon —a thousand times more worthy to be surrounded with all that was most refined and luxurious—he had not dreamed of amassing such treasures of taste and splendour. He promised himself the solace of speedily repairing his involuntary neglect.

As for Gerald, he assumed the bearing of a gentleman received in the house of a lady of fashion; putting altogether aside the familiar tone of a man who is on terms of the greatest possible intimacy with her —whose money, in fact, has purchased everything in the house, from the smile of the hostess to the clothes of the gorgeously-

liveried servants who usher him and his friend into her presence, successively and ceremoniously announcing,

'Lord Pentarvon!'

'Sir Gerald Dalbright!'

CHAPTER XIV.

A PITFALL.

In view of the work to be done on this eventful evening, Seraphine had called to her aid all the resources of her inborn talent as an actress. She had prepared for herself an expression of face, a look, an attitude, a toilette—an ensemble, in fact, of surprising effectiveness; the eye of the closest and most experienced observer would have failed to discover in her even the slightest indication of the priestess of pleasure.

A sort of bright and maidenly candour shone on her forehead. Her face was fresh and calm, her lips rosy, her large eyes tender and almost timid; and over all there was a look of guilelessness that gave to her beauty an enchanting attractiveness.

Lord Pentarvon was fascinated; and Gerald, who had never before seen her under this aspect, was but little less impressed by her appearance.

She received her guests with the aristocratic ease of a woman used to the refined habits of the best society. On Gerald she did not cast a single glance that could reveal the terms of intimacy subsisting between them, or which Lord Pentarvon might have thought objectionable in his presence.

Towards Lord Pentarvon she exhibited an almost respectful deference, which expressed better than words how highly she esteemed him, and how little worthy she felt of the honour conferred on her by his presence in her house.

All his preconceived notions were completely destroyed, and he at once began to understand the irresistible seductiveness of these sirens, whose power he had hitherto denied.

Without an effort Seraphine fell into

conversation with him, and his surprise was infinitely augmented on discovering that her mind was brilliant, cultivated, wide in its range of appreciation, and that every one of her sentences displayed the results of an excellent education.

By degrees he ceased to remember where he was, and that the woman with whom he was talking was one of the class he had but a few hours before denounced so fervidly. He felt at his ease in company with a bright and active intelligence sympathising with his own. His mind unfolded itself, and, in his turn, he became brilliant. Gerald noted this sudden and complete change, and exulted in the result.

'O, pray forgive me, Lord Pentarvon!' cried Seraphine at length; 'it is so delightful to talk with you that you make me forget I am to have the honour of entertaining you at supper. It is nearly one o'clock, and you must be hungry. Allow me to go and give some orders which I hope will

expedite the announcement that all is ready.'

She left the boudoir, Lord Pentarvon following her with his eyes until the falling folds of the *portière* hid her from his sight.

'Well,' asked Gerald quickly, 'what do you think of her?'

Lord Pentarvon did not at once answer, and Gerald repeated his question.

'Charming—too charming!' replied Lord Pentarvon.

His thoughts, as he spoke, turned to his wife, and he felt the pangs of a remorse the more poignant for the pleasure which he had experienced in the society of the worthless woman whose fascination he had been compelled to recognise.

In a few moments Seraphine returned, followed by a servant in livery, who announced that supper was served.

'Let us go, then,' said Seraphine.

Absorbed in the reverie to which we

have referred, Lord Pentarvon did not at once notice her return. Crossing to him, therefore, she said in a gentle voice:

'Will you honour me with your arm, my lord?'

Lord Pentarvon started at the sound of her voice, and, excusing himself for his absent-mindedness, gave her his arm and led her to the supper-room.

All the resources of a taste at once luxurious and refined had been brought to bear on the furnishing and decoration of this room. The table at which the three persons seated themselves might have won the eulogy of Brillat-Savarin himself. Over all there floated an atmosphere charged with tender and voluptuous scents, exhaled from living flowers. Everything that could most readily appeal to the senses was there —light, perfumes, exquisite wines—all that could act most directly upon the mind and soonest lift it into the delightful fever of mental intoxication.

Lord Pentarvon remarked all this as he sat by Seraphine's side.

Conversation, which had moved slowly at first, was beginning to flow easily, when the loud ringing of the house-bell was heard, and Seraphine affected to be startled at the sound.

'Who can it be at this hour?' she murmured as if to herself, but loud enough to be heard by both of her guests.

A minute or two later a footman entered the room and spoke a few words to his mistress in a low tone. Seraphine rose from her seat, apparently vexed, and left the room, saying as she went out,

'Pray excuse me, gentlemen; I shall be back in a moment.'

She was absent a very few minutes, and on her return still exhibited in her face the look of vexation she had shown on leaving the room.

'So very unpleasant!' she exclaimed, as if involuntarily.

'What has happened, my dear madam?' inquired Lord Pentarvon.

'Two of my friends—neighbours, in fact—on their way to a ball, seeing lights here, have unfortunately taken it into their heads to pay me a visit *en route.* May I appeal to your kindness to spare me for a few minutes until I can politely get rid of them?'

'Who are they?' inquired Gerald.

'Lotti and Esther,' replied Seraphine hesitatingly.

'But why don't you ask them in here?' said Gerald

'I feared that Lord Pentarvon might object.'

'I, my dear madam?' cried Lord Pentarvon hastily; 'how could I possibly do so!'

'If you will really permit me—' said Seraphine in a grateful tone.

'Are you not in your own house?' he replied.

'You are very, very kind!—a thousand

thanks!' cried Seraphine, hurrying once more from the room.

She soon returned, accompanied by Lotti and Esther. Lord Pentarvon rose from his seat and bowed to the two women. Any sort of introduction, considering the relative positions of the persons present, would have been in bad taste; Seraphine therefore did not introduce her late visitors to her guests.

'But, my dears,' she cried, 'since the charming idea of dropping in upon me so unexpectedly entered your heads, why did you not come earlier?'

'My dear, I assure you,' replied Esther, 'a quarter of an hour ago neither of us had thought of seeing you to-night. We acted quite on the spur of the moment.'

'And if we had had the least notion that you were not alone,' added Lotti, 'we should never have thought of disturbing you.'

'Disturb me!—what an idea! You know that a visit from you can never be anything but welcome,' returned Seraphine.

'Thanks, dear, for saying so. And now, as we have seen you, good-night.'

'You are already going—almost before you have entered?'

'I told you, dear, we are going to a ball,' replied Esther apologetically.

'Well, let the ball go on without you for a little while,' said Seraphine pleadingly. 'Come, sit down for a moment at least; you see, you are keeping these gentlemen standing.'

'But, really, my dear—' said Lotti.

'I'll not allow any *buts;* stay with us for half an hour, I beg,' cried Seraphine.

Thus pressed, the two women consented to stay.

Lord Pentarvon was distressed by this unexpected addition to the party. He felt himself getting more and more into a false position. So long as he was only in company with Seraphine and Gerald, he perfectly understood the part he intended to play, and hoped that the profoundest se-

crecy would surround his fault, or at least what he considered to be a fault of conduct. But there was now an end to his hope of secrecy; since, on the morrow, either of these women would have the right to say, 'Last night I met Lord Pentarvon at Seraphine's house.'

Bitterly he repented the weakness with which he had ceded to the clever importunities of Gerald. But this repentance came too late. He felt almost inclined to seize his hat and quit the house, but reflection forbade his taking such a course: he had no right to repay with insulting rudeness, and without apparent pretext, the perfectly unobjectionable, nay, he was forced to admit, the charming reception given him by Seraphine.

To the consequences of his imprudence, therefore, he resigned himself, endeavouring as best he might to close his eyes to their gravity. As soon as he had determined on the course he intended to pursue, he raised

his eyes to Esther and Lotti, at whom he had not yet looked.

Dressed to perfection, and affording so strong a contrast of beauty, the two women presented a striking appearance; an appearance in every way calculated to produce a lively and deep impression on the mind of the beholder. Lord Pentarvon was wonder-struck.

Seraphine saw in an instant that the effect which she had calculated on had been produced; but not by a look or a gesture did she betray the least consciousness of the triumph of her plans.

'And what are you going to do, my dears, besides dance?' she asked in the most conversational tone.

'O, there are to be *poses-plastiques*, but they'll be over before we get there,' replied Lotti.

'Then, of course, there'll be supper, and, after supper, unlimited dancing!' cried Esther.

'Ah! I see, you anticipate a delightful night, and can understand your eagerness to get away,' cried Seraphine.

'My dear Seraphine, how can you say anything so cruel!' exclaimed Esther. 'You know that when one is with you, one never wishes to be anywhere else.'

'Except when you happen to be tempted with *poses-plastiques*, supper, and unlimited dancing to follow,' said Seraphine, laughing.

'You know that your society is a greater temptation than all these put together,' cried Lotti.

'Take care!' cried Seraphine.

'Of what?'

'What would you say if I were to take you at your word? No, no; if I were to ask you to give-up all these pleasures you are going to enjoy, I know how certainly you would find it in your hearts to refuse me!'

'Indeed, indeed, we should do nothing of the sort!' cried Esther.

'You say that, because you feel sure I should not have the barbarity to ask such a sacrifice of you.'

'Seraphine, Seraphine, you don't believe it!'

'Prove that I am wrong—by remaining.'

Esther and Lotti exchanged a look, and then the former cried,

'Doubt us, then, if you can; we'll stay.'

'In earnest?'

'Perfectly!' cried the two.

'Then you are a pair of darlings!' cried Seraphine, kissing them one after the other. 'Come, throw off your shawls, and continue with us the supper, delightful before, but which will be infinitely more delightful now.'

Aided by Seraphine, the two speedily disembarrassed themselves of their shawls and tissues.

'I hope,' cried Seraphine, laughing, 'nobody will accuse me of coquetry now, seeing how frankly I run the risk of appearing

quite dowdy beside the two most beautiful women in London, dressed to perfection.'

Hearing their dress thus spoken of, Lord Pentarvon, for the second time, turned his eyes upon Esther and Lotti. At the first glance he had been struck by the astonishing beauty of these two women; he was now almost bewildered at the sight of its splendour.

Lotti, in a simple white dress, looked like a girl of sixteen, radiant in the natural charms of youth and innocence. Esther, on the other hand, was attired in a robe of black satin, which put in full display the magnificent forms of her bust. The sight of her might have suggested to the beholder the Venus Aphrodite descended from its pedestal of marble and metamorphosed by some new Pygmalion into a creature of flesh and blood—an incarnation of seductiveness.

The chastest imagination could not fail to be troubled by the charm of this woman's extraordinary beauty; an ascetic

would have felt compelled to recognise its voluptuous perfection. Such was the appearance of the Jewess on this eventful evening.

Thus she appeared to the dazzled eyes of Lord Pentarvon, who shuddered as he felt the diabolical fascination which, in spite of all the power of his own will, she was beginning to exercise upon his mind.

Seraphine exchanged looks with Gerald, and both hid a smile of triumph which rose to their lips.

It need hardly be said that Esther saw at a glance the effect she had produced on Lord Pentarvon. As for Lotti, she had at once felt herself vanquished by her powerful rival. She understood that, in accordance with the law of contrasts, her soft and maidenly style of beauty — which had a vague material resemblance to that of the Countess of Pentarvon—would be unlikely to attract the husband of that lady.

To triumph over the solid virtue of Lord

Pentarvon it was obvious that nothing less than the most ardent forms of seduction would have to be called into play. Lotti therefore retired from the arena, and for the rest of the night preserved the strictest neutrality.

Seraphine and Gerald, however, were active in their support of the Jewess. First, by an adroit piece of management, the positions of the places at the supper-table were changed. Esther took the chair of Seraphine, and thus found herself seated beside Lord Pentarvon. Then, as soon as the party were rearranged, Gerald proposed a toast to the new arrivals, and this was succeeded by other toasts in quick succession, to none of which Lord Pentarvon could decline to do honour.

In proportion as the perfidious champagne passed from the glasses to the lips of the convives, the coolness of Lord Pentarvon gradually deserted him.

But that which most troubled his mind

was the irresistible fascination of the Jewess, the contemplation of whose beauty he found himself incapable of withstanding. Esther, inspired by the situation in which she was the principal actress, performed her part with consummate skill.

After playing-off all the smaller witcheries of her detestable art, a brilliant idea flashed upon her mind. She pretended that the ornaments entwined in her luxuriant black hair oppressed her by their weight.

'What prevents your taking them out, my dear?' cried Seraphine.

'May I?' asked Esther appealingly.

'Certainly,' replied Seraphine. 'Will you have a small looking-glass?'

'O no, my love,' cried Esther; 'you know I was never a coquette.'

As she spoke she raised her arms above her head, and removed the ornaments from her hair, which, as if by accident, instantly fell in a perfumed mass about her shoulders.

'Good gracious! now I've altogether

unfastened my hair!' she cried. 'Do come and help me to gather it up again, my dear Seraphine. I *must* look such a fright!'

'Pray, madam, let it remain as it is,' cried Lord Pentarvon in a tone of voice scarcely recognisable as his own.

'If *you* really wish it,' replied Esther with a smile of which Venus herself might have been jealous.

'I beg it of you,' cried Lord Pentarvon, hardly conscious of what he was saying.

The soft perfume that exhaled from the tresses of the beautiful Jewess acted upon his senses like an irresistible charm. For a moment the scene before him swam as in a flood of magic light. His eyes involuntarily closed against the blinding refulgence; consciousness deserted him.

CHAPTER XV.

FORGIVEN.

The clocks were striking six as Lord Pentarvon alighted from the cab which brought him from St. John's-wood to Berkeley-square. He was pale, and his face wore a downcast look as he turned his steps towards his own house. Recovered in great part from the effects of the champagne which had a few hours before deprived him of his senses, his reason had returned to him, and with the consciousness of his acts came remorse.

Bitter were his reflections. From the depths of his heart he cursed his own weakness and the accomplices of his ill-doing. He would willingly have surrendered half

his fortune, to have been able to erase from his memory the recollection of his share in the past night's proceedings.

In the simplicity of his nature, nothing could be farther from his thoughts than a suspicion of Gerald's having designedly led him into a snare.

Every step that brought him nearer to his home increased the trouble of his mind. A blush of burning shame mounted to his pale forehead as he thought of reëntering that chaste and happy home, where his pure and innocent wife was awaiting him, unsuspecting the vicious atmosphere out of which he had come into her presence. Was it not a profanation, an impious sacrilege? he asked himself.

A dozen times he passed and repassed the door of his house without courage to cross its threshold. At last, fearing to attract attention from the people who were beginning to move in the streets, he applied his latch-key, passed into the still-quiet

house, and noiselessly ascended the stairs towards his own bedroom.

His knees bent under him as he walked, and vague terror assailed his mind at every step.

'Gracious heavens!' he murmured to himself, 'if every fault that is committed entailed such a punishment as that which I now endure, how few faults would be committed!'

His hope was, that Lady Pentarvon had gone to rest, and had remained unaware of the fact of his having passed the night away from home; and he was about to ascend another flight of stairs, when suddenly a sound proceeding from the lock of his wife's boudoir-door arrested his attention. For a moment he stood bereft of power.

It was no delusion. The sound of the lock was followed by the upraising of the *portière* which hung over the door, and Lady Pentarvon appeared before the affrighted eyes of her husband.

Her dress was the same as that which she had worn when he had last seen her. Thus it was manifest to his eyes that during the night she had not been to rest. In her right hand she held a lighted candle, the pale rays of which fell upon his paler countenance. Her face was ashen-white, and about her eyes, inflamed with weeping, there were two circles of a darker hue. She looked more like a ghost uprisen from a tomb than a living woman.

Lord Pentarvon stood speechless and motionless.

'At last you are returned!' she cried, in a voice hoarse and broken by past sufferings.

He stammered a few indistinct words, and as it were mechanically took her hand. It was cold as stone. She did not attempt to withdraw it from his hold, but said,

'Come with me.'

She led him to her bedchamber. The bed was undisturbed. A second candle,

almost consumed, burned on the mantelpiece. Beside a chair, upon the carpet, lay a handkerchief wet with tears. All these things spoke of how Lady Pentarvon had passed the night.

She seated herself in the chair, while he, with the air of a guilty criminal in presence of his judge, remained standing at a little distance from her. For a few seconds she buried her face in her hands; but at length, suppressing the sobs that rose convulsively to her lips, she raised her head.

The pallor of her face was greater than ever as she turned her beautiful deep eyes, still veiled with tears, upon her husband, and, like the wail of a heart suffering beyond its power of endurance, these words broke from her lips:

'Henry, Henry, what have I done to you?'

Utterly dejected, Lord Pentarvon made no reply.

'You are killing me,' she continued; 'killing me cruelly; and it is in vain I try to think of any fault that I have committed towards you which merits the tortures you are pitilessly inflicting upon me. Tell me what I have done to you—tell me in what way I am culpable Tell me this, in heaven's name; for indeed, indeed, I question in vain both my heart and my conscience.

'I have never had one thought that was not of you, Henry. I have always loved you—I love you still—I shall for ever love you! What have I done, then—with what do you reproach me—that you make me suffer as I am now doing? If you had known, if you could have known, the agony and despair I have endured during this dreadful night, you would have had pity on me. Another such night, and my hair would turn white; another such night, and I should go mad or die!

'O, I know that so great a happiness as that which you had made for me up to this

hour could not last for ever. The angels would become jealous of mankind, if joys worthy of Paradise could be prolonged in this world. But to be cast-down from such a height of happiness as that on which I stood, into such depths of suffering as I now endure, is too much, Henry—too much!'

She paused to give her husband an opportunity to reply. He saw that the only course open to him was at once to attempt to dispel the jealous suspicions which had entered her mind, and which might speedily become certainties. Putting on the best appearance of assurance he could assume, he approached a step nearer to her, and said,

'My dear Blanche, my darling wife, it is my turn to ask—what have I done to you? what has occasioned this suffering and despair? and why do you talk to me in this way?'

The look which she turned upon him, as he uttered these words, was marked by ill-concealed disdain.

'You have not understood me?' she asked.

'Indeed I have not,' he replied.

She raised her shoulders involuntarily. Then, in a slow and grave tone of voice, and crushing under her hand the anonymous letter which she had received the evening before, and which she held concealed in her bosom, she demanded,

'Where have you been all the past night?'

At this direct question Lord Pentarvon staggered like a man struck by a pistol-shot. He recovered himself in the course of a few seconds, however, and replied with as much assurance as he could summon to his voice and manner,

'Where have I been? At my club, losing my money at whist.'

This might have been the truth; Lady Pentarvon had no proof to the contrary. The anonymous letter sent to her by Gerald, it will be remembered, had not been ex-

plicit. It had stated that Lord Pentarvon would not return home — nothing more. She looked into her husband's face with a close and penetrating scrutiny; and this examination sufficed to assure her that he had deceived her, and that he was attempting to deceive her still farther.

Lord Pentarvon's assurance was ill-assumed indeed, and the pallor of his countenance and the trembling of his voice abundantly betrayed the deception he was practising. Moreover, his wife relied on the mysterious sort of second-sight with which almost all women are endowed, which reveals to their instinct of jealousy the most carefully-concealed treason against their love.

It seemed to her—and who can say that it was not so?—that she would not have suffered as she had done, had the absence of her husband been based upon an innocent cause. Then, too, she saw that he was unable to meet her look; his eyes were downcast, and all room for doubt passed

from her mind. Again she raised her shoulders, for contempt at his falsehood was added to anger at his treason.

'Henry,' she said, after a moment's silence, 'I refrain from questioning you, so that you may, at least, be spared the shame of answering me with falsehoods. Besides, it is useless for you to seek to justify yourself, since my resolution is taken — irrevocably taken. Nothing you can say will change my mind; therefore listen patiently to what I have to tell you, for, according to all appearances, this is the last time we shall converse together.'

'Blanche, in the name of heaven, what do you mean?' cried Lord Pentarvon in terror.

'I mean that I am tired of suffering,' she replied; 'that a speedy death is preferable to a slow agony. I mean that you have offended me in all that was most pure and holy in me—my love and my self-esteem. Between us, all is over for ever; I take back my heart, which you no longer

prize; I shall return to the shelter of my father's roof, there to pray heaven to send me the blessing of forgetfulness, until such time as it may see fit to end my earthly trial.'

'Blanche! Blanche!' cried Lord Pentarvon with feverish excitement, 'you will not do this!'

'I shall do all that I have told you, Henry,' she replied.

'Leave me, who love you—'

'Who no longer love me.'

'Blanche, you cannot be serious!'

'Nothing can be more serious than my intention.'

'But do you believe that I will ever consent?'

'What does it matter to me whether you consent or not?'

'Do not forget that I am your husband —that I have sacred rights.'

'You have yourself abnegated all such rights.'

'No, no!' cried Lord Pentarvon; 'and I will assert them to the utmost.'

'You will use force to restrain me?' she asked.

'Yes—even force, if it be necessary.'

'We shall see!'

Lady Pentarvon looked at the clock upon the mantelpiece.

'It is nearly seven o'clock,' she said with terrible calmness; 'at nine o'clock I shall leave this house.' And, without appearing to occupy herself farther with Lord Pentarvon, she proceeded to make a small selection of linen, which she placed in a travelling-bag.

The sight of these preparations roused her husband's despair to a pitch of madness. And then occurred between these two young people, born for each other, and made to be the all-in-all of each other's life, one of those shocking scenes which are more frequent in real life than is supposed.

Lord Pentarvon threw himself at her

feet, wept, and besought her with passionate supplications, oblivious of his dignity, like a slave asking pardon on his knees. At first she was obdurate. As she had herself told him, he had doubly wounded her—in her love and in her self-esteem; wounds which a woman never forgets, and rarely forgives. But, after a while, she relented. Again and again he declared his innocence; and she reflected that, even if he were as guilty as she had suspected him of being, it was impossible to doubt the sincerity of his repentance.

No woman who retains in her heart any of the tenderness that belongs to her nature can resist the appeal of a man's tears. Lady Pentarvon felt that she could no longer hold out against those of her husband; but she resolved to draw from her submission the advantages of a victory.

'Henry,' she said, after a long silence, 'do you remember what passed between

us a few hours ago? My sad presentiments have but too soon been realised. I appealed to you on my knees to take me away from London.'

'I remember,' stammered Lord Pentarvon.

'Well,' continued Lady Pentarvon, 'if it is true that you still love me—if it is true, as you tell me, that you would prefer death to separation from me, I will consent to believe and to forgive you; but I demand of you a proof.'

'Name it, my own Blanche!' cried Lord Pentarvon.

'You must give me the promise which yesterday you refused me.'

'You still desire to quit London?'

'Yes; but I now no longer address a prayer to you—I make a demand. You may refuse to obey me, but you know that in doing so you pronounce our eternal separation.'

'O Blanche, what need is there of this

new threat? I have no dearer wish than to quit London?'

'You consent, then?' she cried, scarcely daring to trust the evidence of her senses, so delighted was she by his prompt submission. 'When shall we leave?'

'To-morrow—never to return, if such is your wish.'

'O, can it be true! am I really in my senses!' she cried, with a burst of joy so wild and passionate that a flood of tears of love and gratitude sprung to the eyes of her husband.

Lord Pentarvon opened his arms, and she threw herself upon his bosom. After he had held her for a few moments to his heart, he raised her gentle face and kissed away her tears with his repentant lips.

'My Blanche! my love!' he cried, 'I swear by my love and honour these precious tears are the last that I will ever cause to flow—I swear it.'

Lady Pentarvon answered only by a

look and a smile; but in that smile there was complete forgiveness.

The good genius of the pair thus appeared to have brought them safely through the terrible struggle in which they had been involved. The sinister star of Gerald and Seraphine had paled.

In the clear light of his wife's love and forgiveness Lord Pentarvon speedily ceased to remember his fault and his remorse. What new storm was gathering to dim this calm and holy light, from which he drew happiness as he drew breath from the living air about him, we shall know full soon.

END OF BOOK II.

BOOK III.

Paying the Penalty.

CHAPTER I.

THE DANGER OF DELAY.

Completely reassured by the promise of her husband's readiness to quit London, Lady Pentarvon ceased to see any necessity for a hurried departure. For a few days —during which Lord Pentarvon would be able conveniently to settle all his affairs— their visit might be extended, she thought, without danger; with this advantage, indeed, that it would evince to her husband how perfectly she had renewed her trust in him.

Two days passed.

How much may happen—how much may be done—in two days! Forty-eight hours! —and, as Mr. Affable Hawk exultingly remarks in the *Game of Speculation*, the world

itself only takes twenty-four hours to go round the sun! In these two days the abominable plot, intended to sacrifice Lord and Lady Pentarvon, had been carried forward many stages by its heartless and detestable contrivers.

On the morning of the third day, Lord Pentarvon was about leaving his dressing-room to join Lady Pentarvon at the breakfast-table, when his valet, who had left the room a few minutes before, returned with a mysterious air.

'What is it, Wilson?' inquired Lord Pentarvon.

The man's manner became yet more mysterious, and he looked about him like a conspirator in dread of being surprised.

'May I venture to inquire the meaning of all this pantomime?' said Lord Pentarvon.

'I should be sorry if your lordship thought that, on an occasion requiring the utmost discretion, I failed to understand my duty.'

For a moment Lord Pentarvon fancied his servant had been drinking; but when he recollected that it was still on the early side of noon, the supposition of the man's being tipsy appeared untenable.

'Never mind what I may think of your discretion, but tell me what you have come back for,' said Lord Pentarvon sharply.

'In as few words as possible I will, my lord,' replied the valet. 'On leaving your lordship's presence a few moments ago, and on reaching the servants' hall, I found a youth—in fact, a lady's page in handsome livery—inquiring for me. This youth was the bearer of a letter—'

Wilson once more looked carefully about him, to make sure that no ears save those of his master were present. Satisfied that the communication he was prepared to make would go no farther than he intended it to go, but still determined to run no needless risk, he lowered his voice almost to a whisper, as he added:

'The letter is addressed to your lordship!'

'Well, in the name of wonder, what of that?'

'I beg your pardon, my lord,' replied Mr. Wilson; 'the letter was put into my hands with the strictest injunction that it was to be conveyed with the utmost care; that no one else should see it or be aware of its arrival, especially her ladyship.'

Mr. Wilson drew a letter from the breast of his coat, and slipped it into his master's outstretched hand.

'That will do; you need not stay,' said Lord Pentarvon, trembling in every limb, and turning deadly pale.

Mr. Wilson bowed and left the dressing-room. And the look that was in his face as he went out of the door said as plainly as words, 'By George, if Lady Pentarvon only knew what *I* know!'

The moment he was alone Lord Pentarvon examined the letter.

The writing was unknown to him. It was that of a woman, and evidently of a woman little used to write. The envelope smelt strongly of patchouli. That it came from Esther was the instant conviction of his mind. A cold perspiration burst out upon his forehead, and he sank, almost helplessly, into a chair. A presentiment of evil overwhelmed him.

Some few minutes passed, during which time he was hardly conscious of what had happened; but at length his eyes fell upon the fatal letter in his hand, and he started anew into full and terrified consciousness.

He had not courage to open the letter; he dreaded lest, like the fabled box of Pandora, when opened a train of terrible evils should issue from it.

At length, however, he summoned up resolution to open the missive, and was in the act of tearing the envelope, when a sound in the room adjoining his own arrested his intention.

'May I come in, Henry?' asked Lady Pentarvon from the outer side of the door.

He had but just time to hide in the pocket of his dressing-gown the letter, of the contents of which he was still ignorant, before Lady Pentarvon entered the room.

She started in alarm the moment her eyes fell upon his face.

'Good heavens, Henry!' she exclaimed, 'how pale you are! Are you ill?'

'It's a mere nothing,' replied Lord Pentarvon; 'a slight giddiness, which will pass off in a few moments.'

Lady Pentarvon flew to her husband's dressing-table, and returned to his side with a flask of eau-de-cologne, with which she sprinkled his temples.

'Has it passed away, dear?' she inquired with tender solicitude, at the end of a few seconds.

'Completely,' replied Lord Pentarvon, to whose cheeks, indeed, the colour slowly began to return.

'Thank heaven!' she cried. 'I came to see whether you were ready for breakfast. Shall we go down?'

'Yes; I'm quite ready for breakfast,' he replied in a hesitating manner, and presenting his arm to Lady Pentarvon, who leaned tenderly upon it.

'My love,' she cried almost immediately, 'are you still feeling unwell? Your arm trembles so.'

'I don't yet feel quite the thing,' he replied; 'but after breakfast I daresay I shall be all right again. Don't be uneasy, dear.'

They went down to the breakfast-room. It need hardly be said that their meal was not a very cheerful one. Lord Pentarvon's mind was so completely preoccupied, that it was with great difficulty he was able to pay the least attention to anything his wife said. Two or three times, indeed, the strange incoherence of his answers, which did not in the remotest degree apply to the

remarks she had addressed to him, would have provoked her surprise and laughter, but that she attributed his absent-mindedness to the slight indisposition of which he had complained.

On one topic alone was he able to rouse himself for a moment from the kind of mental feebleness into which he had fallen: this was when Lady Pentarvon inquired,

'Have you settled all your affairs in London?'

'Everything,' he replied.

'And so have I,' she said cheerfully. 'Yesterday I had a grand day's shopping, and did everything I had to do; so that I could really start for dear old Pentarvon to-morrow, if you wished it.'

'Let us start to-morrow, then, by all means!' cried Lord Pentarvon, snatching at the idea as eagerly as a drowning seaman seizes upon a floating fragment of wreck.

'Shall we, really?' cried Lady Pentarvon joyously.

'By all means! At what hour shall it be?' replied her husband, in a tone scarcely less joyous.

The necessary details of their departure were quickly discussed and settled; and then Lord Pentarvon relapsed into a sombre absent-mindedness, from which his wife vainly attempted to rouse him. He had eaten little at breakfast, and that with manifest repugnance.

'How do you find yourself now, my love?' Lady Pentarvon inquired as they rose from the table.

'Not quite so well as I hoped,' he replied. 'But it's nothing. I had a restless night, and I suppose it's telling upon me. I'll go and lie down for an hour.'

'Shall I come and sit with you?'

'Certainly not, my love,' he replied quickly. 'You'll find enough to do in looking after your maid and her packing.'

'Go and take a sleep, then, if you can; and leave me to make all the arrangements

for to-morrow,' she said, kissing him affectionately before parting from him.

Lord Pentarvon immediately sought the retirement of his own room, and after locking the door, to guard against the possibility of interruption, he proceeded to tear open the dreaded letter, having first lighted a taper, so as to be able to destroy the letter the moment he had made himself master of its contents.

With trembling hands he unfolded the paper.

His instinct had not deceived him: the letter was—or rather purported to be—from Esther, and its first words sent a cold shudder through his frame.

'Dearest Henry,' it began, 'for two long days and nights I have counted the hours, hoping that every minute would bring you back to me. I no longer know whether I am sane or mad; I only know that a power, to which I can give no name, has bound up my life with the one being in all the world

destined to be the ruler of my fate — the being from whom I have at last learned the full capacity of my soul to love. Yes, Henry, I love you — with trembling hand and blushing brow I make the avowal to you. I know that you will read these lines with anger and disdain; but to your anger and disdain I submit joyfully, sustained as I am by hope, by the audacious hope that you will one day share the infinite love which you have taught me to feel. I close my eyes to the obstacles that lie between me and the realisation of the enchanting vision that rises before me of that day's arrival. Let the whole world raise its voice against me, to declare that you are another's, I will resolutely close my ears against the hateful declaration. Remember what I am, —almost a savage in character, instinct, and birth. In my veins flows the blood of Moorish kings. My passions are as devastating as fire. Come back to me, and I will be for you as timid as a bird, as tractable as a

dog. But O, beware, if you are unpitying in your avoidance of me.—O, beware, lest my love turn to all-destroying hate. Do not think that you can fly from me. Go where you will, I will follow you. I will claim you of your wife, even in the hall of the castle of which you bear the name. I repeat it, I love you. Come to me, then—as you value your future peace, come to me without farther delay.'

Seraphine, whose abominable skill is easily traceable in this strange composition, had well calculated the effect it would produce on Lord Pentarvon's mind; that effect was instant and overwhelming. He was too violently agitated to remark either the bombast of the style or the hollow inflation of the sentiments expressed—drawn from the vulgarest melodramas.

He saw and understood but one thing—that Esther loved, or pretended to love him; and that, as she threatened, she would pursue him without rest or truce; that his

peace of mind was lost, and that thenceforth an inevitable and terrible catastrophe hung over him, like the sword of Damocles, suspended by a single hair.

A man better versed in the 'ways of the world' than Lord Pentarvon, finding himself in such a position, would have placed the letter of the pretended daughter of Moorish kings in his pocket-book, and at once put himself in communication with the nearest sitting police-magistrate. The thought of taking such a course never even occurred to Lord Pentarvon's mind.

As soon as he had read the letter, it fell from his nerveless hand on to the carpet at his feet; but, recovering for a moment from the first shock, he snatched it up, and held it in the flame of the candle until every particle was reduced to ashes. Then his strength completely failed him, and he sank down in his chair, overwhelmed in mind and body.

He tried to think upon his position, but

from his point of view it appeared utterly hopeless. Escape was impossible. If he fled, Esther, like an enraged tigress, would follow on his steps. Yet how could he remain in London? Had not Lady Pentarvon forgiven him on the strength of his promise to quit London, and was she not at that very moment making preparations for their departure on the next morning?

No plan offering the least hope of success presented itself to his mind. The only course he could think of was to apply at once to Gerald for his advice and assistance; and without a moment's delay, he set off in search of his treacherous friend.

CHAPTER II.

ANOTHER SNARE.

GERALD was at home when Lord Pentarvon reached Mayfair, and at once received his visitor, whose hand he shook with a sort of grave eagerness.

'My dear Pentarvon,' he cried, 'can you forgive me for the harm I have so blindly, so unintentionally done you—for which I shall blame myself to the end of my days?'

'You know what has happened, then?' asked Lord Pentarvon.

'She told Seraphine her intention of writing to you; and—I see by your agitation—'

'You are not deceived,' cried Lord Pentarvon. 'But this woman, Dalbright?—this woman?'

'I must tell you the truth, Pentarvon: the unfortunate creature, as she has told you, has fallen violently, madly in love with you.'

Lord Pentarvon shuddered.

'She is nearly out of her senses,' continued Gerald; 'and it has needed all Seraphine's influence, and, I must add, threats on my part, to prevent her causing a scandal, by coming to seek you at your house.'

'So, then, this dreadful woman really intends to carry out her insane threats?' cried Lord Pentarvon, trembling from head to foot.

Gerald affected a look of painful depression, and made no reply.

'Good heavens!' cried Lord Pentarvon, 'what is to become of me?'

The tone of anguish in which this heartfelt ejaculation was uttered appeared to move Gerald deeply, for he started to his feet, and for a few moments paced the room in an agitated manner.

'Calm yourself, my dear fellow, I entreat you!' he cried. 'I alone have been the cause of all this trouble, and it is I who must repair it.'

'Repair it!' cried Lord Pentarvon; 'is that possible?'

'Yes, it *is* possible—it *must* be!' exclaimed Gerald; 'and the task is mine.'

For an instant Lord Pentarvon's pale brow was illumined by a ray of joy, but only for an instant.

'It is possible to repair the harm done, but *how?*' he demanded in a tone of helplessness.

'Calm yourself, and leave all to me; you know that I would not deceive you by raising false hopes,' replied Gerald.

Lord Pentarvon silently shook him by the hand, and Gerald pretended to wipe away a tear.

'Ask me no questions, my dear Pentarvon, but meet me at the club at dinner, and I will then tell you how I have succeeded.

Meantime, keep up your spirits, and rely on me.'

Lord Pentarvon returned home to lunch, and informed his wife that he was engaged to take a parting dinner with Gerald in the evening.

Gerald hastened to St. John's-wood, and remained for some hours in conference with Seraphine.

At the time appointed Gerald and Lord Pentarvon met again; and when they had finished dining and were left to themselves, Lord Pentarvon eagerly inquired what his friend had succeeded in doing with the view of withdrawing him from his terrible embarrassment.

Gerald at first appeared to hesitate, at length seemed to take a sudden resolution.

'My dear Pentarvon,' he said, 'what I have to say is very difficult. I must beg of you, therefore, to listen to me with the utmost patience and indulgence; and, above

all, not to criticise every word that drops from my lips as if it had been studied. What I am going to say, I shall say just as it happens to shape itself at the moment. When there is but one road open to the end at which we want to arrive, the only way is to follow that road, is it not?'

'Doubtless,' assented Lord Pentarvon.

'Will you promise me, then, to listen to me calmly?'

'I promise,' replied Lord Pentarvon, whose heart sank at this ominous exordium.

'When a great fire is raging in a closely-built town,' said Gerald, 'you know that it is sometimes found necessary to sacrifice a portion of the houses to secure the safety of the rest—to isolate the conflagration, so as to secure its mastery.'

'I do not see the bearing of this example,' said Lord Pentarvon, looking at him in surprise.

'I was trying to suggest as forcibly as

I could the position in which you are unfortunately placed. To me it appears but too evident that there is only one way to save your life from the disaster which threatens it; and that is to isolate the cause of peril!'

'By what means?' cried Lord Pentarvon in astonishment.

'By seeing Esther again.'

'Never!' cried Lord Pentarvon, rising from his chair and pacing the room in violent agitation. 'Never!'

'You have promised to listen to me calmly,' said Gerald. 'Hear me out, and then see whether the view I take is not the right one.' Lord Pentarvon reseated himself, and Gerald continued: 'I have this afternoon seen Esther. The passion she feels for you is a sort of delirium, exaggerated by opposition on your part. Now I know the nature of this half-barbaric creature. Her love is like straw, that burns itself out at the first blaze; but it

requires careful management to prevent its destroying everything that comes in its burning way.

'The question,' continued Gerald, after a moment's pause, 'is simply one of tact and patience. Let her believe that she is unopposed, that she is triumphant, and in a week, perhaps, she will have forgotten your name, your very existence. You see, then, that your safety lies in temporising. Humour her mad passion, and you disarm her at once; drive her to desperation, and you expose yourself to incalculable danger.—That is what I had to say to you, my dear Pentarvon; herein appears to me to lie the sole means of averting the evil that hangs over you. Reflect calmly, my dear fellow; reflect and decide.'

Lord Pentarvon had listened with profound attention to the clever sophisms of his friend. As for Gerald, he had but uttered a set speech, the material of which had been supplied to him by Seraphine.

Seated with his head resting upon his hands, Lord Pentarvon silently revolved in his mind all that Gerald had said; and when, at length, he raised his face, he appeared to be, at least in part, in agreement with his false friend.

'But supposing what you propose should actually be the only way open to me,' he said, 'it is closed to me.'

'How?'

Lord Pentarvon described the scene which had passed between himself and Lady Pentarvon on the morning of his return home after the supper at Seraphine's, and stated the promise he had given, of leaving London the following day. It appeared impossible for him to put off his departure beyond the time fixed.

'Is that the only difficulty?' inquired Gerald, with a slight contraction of the lip, which, however, was unnoticed by Lord Pentarvon. 'My dear fellow, if that is all, set your mind at ease. Leave me to man-

age matters, and Lady Pentarvon herself shall ask you to delay your departure.'

Lord Pentarvon looked at him with an air almost of stupefaction.

'What do you propose to do?' he asked.

'Ask me no questions, but wait here till I return. Amuse yourself in the library —in the smoking- or billiard-rooms; but don't go away till I have seen you again, even if I keep you waiting two or three hours.'

He would give no explanation of his intentions; and Lord Pentarvon at last parted from him, impressed with the belief that his friend had discovered a way to release him from the difficulties by which he was enthralled.

Within a quarter of an hour from the moment of Gerald's parting with Lord Pentarvon the following note was placed in Lady Pentarvon's hands; the handwriting was the same as that of the anonymous

note which had so recently warned her of her husband's abuse of her confidence:

'Madam, your husband is deceiving you —shamefully, and lost to all sense of gentlemanly dignity and decency. The creature who has supplanted you is a Jewess of great beauty, picked up by him from out of the gutter. He is to pass this evening in company with her at the house he has furnished for her at —— ——, St. John's-wood. One whose heart bleeds for your wrongs thus advertises you of your husband's perfidy, and puts the proof within your reach. If you would surprise him, and place his guilt beyond question in your own mind, go at ten o'clock to the house above named, the garden gate of which you will find open; you will have no difficulty in entering the house unnoticed. On the discovery you will then make depends the entire future of your life; let this reflection supply you with the requisite resolution. I withhold my name; but believe me

when I say that it is that of, madam, the truest, most respectful, and most submissive *friend* you have in the world.'

Twenty times Lady Pentarvon read this terrible letter through and through, the prey of an indescibable agony of mind—of wild, confused, and desperate thoughts. But at length, with a bound, she sprang to her feet. Her brows were knit; a fixed look and bitter smile attested the violent constraint she was putting upon herself. Her resolution was taken.

CHAPTER III.

ENTRAPPED.

The clock upon the mantelpiece of her boudoir told Lady Pentarvon that she must not delay a moment, if she was bent upon reaching the place named by her anonymous correspondent at the hour indicated. She did not falter in the resolution she had taken, but at once proceeded to carry it out with almost automatic precision.

Without calling for the assistance of her maid, she threw a shawl over her shoulders, put on her bonnet, and descended to the hall, where her appearance startled the footman in waiting almost out of his propriety. Answering the man's inquiry, as to whether he should call a cab for her ladyship, with a short 'no,' she passed out of the house,

and rapidly crossed in the direction of Oxford-street, where she speedily found a cab.

Her directions to the driver, though not very precise, were sufficiently intelligible to that functionary to draw from him a ready 'All right, miss! *I* know the place. Pull up a little way before I come to it? Certainly, miss,—to oblige *you!*'

The drive was a short one, and a clock was striking ten as the cab stopped in the neighbourhood of the house of which Lady Pentarvon was in search, and to which she was directed by the cabman.

'What is your fare?' asked Lady Pentarvon, searching for her purse.

'O, what you like, miss; leave it entirely to you,' replied the cabman.

'But,' stammered Lady Pentarvon, 'I'd rather you told me—'

'Say half-a-crown, then,' said the man, in a tone that implied, 'with a lady of your sort, of course, such a sum represents a merely nominal payment.'

To her consternation, Lady Pentarvon found that she had left her home without money, the terrible purpose of her journey having put all lesser considerations out of her mind.

'I'm very sorry,' she said tremulously, 'but—I find I have no money.'

'You don't mean *that?*' said the cabman in a tone of affected surprise.

'I came from my home very hurriedly, and—unfortunately—I forgot my purse.'

'*Very* unfortunately; because that's a sort of accident as we're a continually finding young parties in this neighbourhood indulging in; and they don't do it at *our* expense very often.'

'I don't know what to do,' cried Lady Pentarvon, becoming fully aware of the difficulty of her position.

'O, search in all your pockets, I'm in no hurry; I dessay you'll find a little half-sovereign in one o' the corners, what you didn't remember you had.'

'Indeed, indeed, I have no money whatever,' cried Lady Pentarvon, whose agitation was increasing every moment.

'O, come, I say! this won't do!' cried the cabman, altering his tone. 'I must have my fare or drive you to the nearest police-station, as the act directs, whichever you like. Look here, haven't you got nothing about you?'

Lady Pentarvon seized the idea almost before it had shaped itself in words.

'O, yes!' she cried; 'I have this bracelet.'

'All right—that'll do. Here's my number; when you pays me the five shillings, in course you can have your bracelet back.'

As he spoke, he gave Lady Pentarvon the ticket bearing the number of his cab, and she handed him a valuable bracelet, only too glad to be released from his power.

'If you ain't going to be very long,' he remarked, 'I don't mind waiting for you.'

'Yes, wait for me,' she replied eagerly,

as she hurried away towards the house he had pointed out to her as the one of which she was in search.

The cabman watched her retreating form with considerable interest, and when she was out of sight indulged in a few observations and reflections concerning her.

'This here's a rum sort of a caper,' he said to himself; 'what's the meaning of it? what's that there little party's little game? She was precious ready to let me have her bracelet. My eye! suppose she's done me, arter all! They sells for a few bob awfully correct imitations of the real things in the Burlington Arcade. If these here stones is bits o' glass, and this here gold Brummagem, I ain't done a job as I'd be proud to tell everybody on!'

The house to which Lady Pentarvon's trembling steps were directed was—as will, no doubt, have been surmised—Seraphine's. The outer gate she found ajar, and, strong in her resolution to test to the utmost the

truth of the information given to her in the mysterious letter, she entered the grounds and proceeded towards the house, guided by the tones of a piano, on which some of the gayest *morceaux* from the *Traviata* were being played.

No other sounds came from the house, the lower windows of which were lighted from within. For a moment Lady Pentarvon thought of the possibility of her having mistaken the house, but on recalling the address given in the letter she ceased to feel any doubt. The outer door of a conservatory, filled with choice flowers and ferns, stood open, and beyond that was the open door of the sumptuously-furnished drawing-room.

As she crossed the threshold of the conservatory the sound of the piano ceased. At the door of the drawing-room she listened intently through the beating of her heart, but no sound of voices met her ear. Summoning all her resolution to her aid,

she crossed the room, and turned the handle of a door opening into a boudoir.

The room was empty as she looked into it, but the piano stood open, and in the air still lingered the light smoke of a cigar. Faintness began to steal over her. Here, in this room, a few moments before, her husband had been—in what infamous company! She staggered to a couch and sank down upon it, all the strength which had so far sustained her flying from her before this terrible thought.

Then, for the first time, she reflected on the imprudence of the step she was taking; then, for the first time, the peril of her own position—here alone, in a strange house, at night — flashed upon her mind, and she trembled with terror. The anonymous letter in which she had so blindly confided, —might it not have been intended to draw her into a snare? a snare that had been artfully baited with her own well-founded jealousy?

Again she thought, 'I have no enemies!' and, as no word of love had ever been breathed into her ears that had not been uttered by her husband, the idea of being the victim of a would-be lover's guilty enterprise never for a moment occurred to her mind. Calmed, and to some extent fortified, by her reflections, she waited for what might happen.

A quarter of an hour passed, and the stillness of the house remained unbroken. Vague terror was again creeping over her, and she was beginning to think of retreating while retreat was open to her, when a *portière* which concealed an inner door of the boudoir was gently raised, and Gerald entered the room.

'You!—you here, Sir Gerald Dalbright!' cried Lady Pentarvon, starting to her feet, and looking at him with inexpressible astonishment.

Gerald placed a finger on his lips, as if to enjoin silence, and at the same moment

he crossed the room and carefully closed the door by which Lady Pentarvon had entered the boudoir.

At the time she attached no particular importance to the act, her mind being agitated on another account.

'In all probability—since I find you here at this moment—you know the motive which has brought me here?' she cried.

Gerald assented with a bow.

'Perhaps you are yourself the author of this letter?' she asked, holding out to him the anonymous epistle.

'I am,' he replied.

'You!' cried Lady Pentarvon, scarcely able to believe an admission so unblushingly made—'you, Sir Gerald Dalbright,—my husband's friend!'

'I am still more yours, Lady Pentarvon.'

'Perhaps; yet I do not know whether I ought to thank you for the service you have rendered me,' she replied. 'You say

that you are my friend, and you show me the abyss into which my husband has plunged; but is it not, at least in some measure, through you that he has fallen? I firmly believe that had Lord Pentarvon never known you, much shame and sorrow would have been spared both him and me.'

These words were spoken with a simple and touching dignity that awoke in the callous mind of the young *roué* a slight and momentary emotion; but the good effect lasted only for an instant.

'You are unjust towards me, Lady Pentarvon,' he cried. 'You accuse *me* of having been the cause of your husband's misconduct; but, on the contrary, I have—at every opportunity, and exerting my utmost power—endeavoured to turn him from the dangerous course he is bent on pursuing. All my efforts have been unavailing; I have been vanquished in the struggle.'

'I wish I could believe you,' she replied. 'If you really felt for me the interest of

which you have just spoken, why did you not sooner warn me of the danger that was hanging over me?'

'Perhaps I ought to have had more courage; but the part of an informer is so difficult to play,' said Gerald.

'Yet you have taken it upon yourself!'

Gerald blushed scarlet.

'I—I hesitated a long while,' he stammered; 'but at last a time came when I ceased to be master of my actions, or of my will; the motive by which I was called upon to act was so powerful, that every consideration had to be sacrificed to it.'

'I do not understand you,' said Lady Pentarvon.

'You do not understand, because—because you do not know what has long been passing in my mind, Lady Pentarvon,' he cried, with growing intensity of manner and emphasis.

In the frank ingenuousness of her pure-mindedness Lady Pentarvon had not a

thought of the danger that lurked in these words of Gerald's.

'What has been passing in your mind?' she asked innocently.

For a moment he was completely disarmed, and the blood forsook his cheeks; but the next instant, with purple brow and eyes that glittered with audacity, he threw himself at her feet and exclaimed:

'This!—I love you!'

Like the shock of a thunderclap this monstrous declaration fell upon the young wife's ears. For a short time her senses were benumbed; but speedily a light flashed upon her mind, and revealed to her the entire danger of her position. She saw, only too clearly, that she had been infamously entrapped.

She had before been pale, she now became livid. Her heart beat wildly and almost to bursting, and big tears, which she could not restrain, rolled down her blanched cheeks. She joined her hands,

and held them supplicatingly towards Gerald.

'In the name of heaven,' she cried, 'O, what have I done to you that you should treat me in this way?'

'What have you done!' he replied, rising and seizing her hands, 'you have made me love you—love you so passionately that there is nothing in the world I now care for but the requital of my love by you!'

'O, hush! hush!' she cried. 'What you say is madness! You know that it is impossible. You know that I am united to another, not only by the sacred bonds of marriage, but by the ties of love, deep, infinite, eternal!'

'No love is eternal,' cried Gerald; 'a husband's love least of all. Hear me, Blanche—dear Blanche!'

As if the sound of her name coming from his lips had stung her, she started, and wrenched her hands from his grasp. He attempted to enfold her in his arms, but

she repulsed him with a gesture full of pride and disdain.

'You are bold, to dare to lay a hand on me, Sir Gerald Dalbright!' she cried, in a tone such as she might have used to an insolent lacquey whom she was ordering out of her presence.

Gerald, red and pale by turns, appeared undecided as to the course he should take.

'I now understand you,' she continued; 'but you have wonderfully misunderstood me in supposing that the way to my heart was by the path of falsehood, rascality, and cowardice! You have made a great mistake; and since, by your means, we are here face to face, I will tell you what I think of you and your acts. I will cast the truth in your face—that only can console me for the shame of ever having permitted you to set foot within my house!'

She paused to take breath. Gerald listened, with clenched hands and close-set

teeth—drops of perspiration standing upon his forehead—without daring to interrupt her.

'You have played—and with what cynicism!' she continued, 'the most scandalous of all farces—that of false friendship! More cowardly than a thief—for the thief at least does not shake the hand of the man he is about to rob—you have stolen the affection of my too-trusting husband. How have you repaid his brotherly regard and confidence in you? By a monstrous treason! by calumny! Yes, by calumny; for I now clearly see the true nature of your infamous accusations. And you have dared to tell me you love me! Thank heaven, there is between me and such as you an impassable gulf; and this you knew so well, that you were obliged to draw me into this snare before you could venture even to pronounce the word "love" in my ears! Sir Gerald Dalbright, you are not a gentleman, but a vulgar scoundrel! Now, stand aside!'

'Lady Pentarvon!' cried Gerald, about to bar her passage to the door.

'Stand aside!' she repeated.

Gerald appeared to be completely dominated by the tone of command in which these words were uttered, and involuntarily made way for her.

With head erect, and eyes that darted beams of fiery indignation, Lady Pentarvon unfastened the door, crossed the drawing-room, passed through the conservatory and the garden, and presently gained the road beyond the outer gate.

'Thank heaven! — thank heaven!' she cried, and burst into tears.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BRACELET.

Scarcely was Lady Pentarvon safe from the peril into which she had been so infamously entrapped, before the nervous strength which had sustained her gave way, and she was almost on the point of fainting with terror. The thought that Gerald might pursue her took possession of her mind. She became incapable of reasoning on the facts of her situation ; she forgot that a cab was in waiting for her, which would in the course of a few minutes place her in the security of her own home. She remembered nothing but that Gerald was behind her, and that she was flying from his odious pursuit.

Unconscious of what she was doing, she

hurried away in the direction exactly opposite to that she should have taken to reach the cab, the driver of which was patiently awaiting her return. That sagacious individual caught a glimpse of her retreating form ; but though the thought crossed his mind that he recognised her figure, it was not before she was out of sight that it suggested to him the idea of his fare having designedly avoided him.

'Why blow me, yes ; it must a-been her!' he cried, knocking the ash out of his pipe on the edge of one of the wheels of his cab. 'From where she was a-crossin' the road she must a-come out of the very house I see her go into. Cuss'd if I don't believe she's done me, arter all!'

He hurriedly pulled from out of his coat-pocket the bracelet Lady Pentarvon had left in his hands, and closely examined it by the light of his lamp.

'Looks as if it might be worth a fifty-pun' note,' he said, 'and mayn't be worth

the price o' half a pint o' gin. The artful young warmint! I'll go arter her,' he exclaimed, preparing to mount his box; 'and if I comes up with her—well, she'll remember trying of it on with Bill Windslipp.'

He had taken the reins in his hand and was about to bring the lash of his whip smartly down on the off flank of his dozing horse, when he was addressed by Gerald, whose advance he had not noticed.

'Hold hard, my man,' cried Gerald. 'Have you seen a lady pass this way—quickly—within the last three or four minutes?'

'Ho, ho!' said Mr. Windslipp to himself. 'Lady as come out of one of these here villas?' he asked.

'Yes; the second on the right from here,' replied Gerald.

'Then I *was* right—it *was* her!' ejaculated Mr. Windslipp.

'Her! Do you know anything of this lady?' inquired Gerald with surprise.

'I only know as I drove her up here from Oxford-street, and that she's kep me a-waiting here for near an hour, and has cut off now without paying me my fare. That's all I know about her, and rather more than I care to know too.'

'I'll pay you her fare,' replied Gerald, handing him half-a-crown.

'Much obliged to yer, guv'nor,' cried Mr. Windslipp. 'Shall I try and ketch her up?'

'No, never mind doing that; but tell me whether you saw her face—whether you should know her again if you met her.'

'Certain of it. When she began to talk about having no money to pay her fare—coming out without her pus, and all that stuff—I took a good look at her under the light of this here lamp. O yes, I should know her agin.'

Gerald made a note in his pocket-book of the number of Mr. Windslipp's cab, and also of that gentleman's badge. There was

nothing very unusual or alarming in the proceeding, but it nevertheless vaguely suggested to Mr. Windslipp's mind the idea of his 'being wanted' at some future time, and that the bracelet in his possession might somehow become the subject of inquiry, if it wasn't after all so worthless as he suspected.

'I beg your pardon for asking the question, guv'nor,' said Mr. Windslipp, touching his hat, 'but *could* yer tell me the address of that there young party?'

'Why do you want to know?' asked Gerald.

''Cause I'd call in the morning, and give her back something she's left behind her.'

'Something she left in your cab?'

'No, not exactly *in* the keb,' replied Mr. Windslipp, ''cause in point o' fact she left it in my hands, having got no money, as she said, to pay her fare.'

'What did she leave with you?' inquired Gerald.

'Well, this here bracelet is what she left,' said Mr. Windslipp, handing it to Gerald, who at a glance recognised it as one habitually worn by Lady Pentarvon. 'Ain't worth much, I fancy, is it, guv'nor?'

The cabman's question furnished Gerald with an idea which he proceeded to act upon without a moment's hesitation. In the most careless tone of voice he could assume, he replied,

'O no, nearly worthless. Cost about four or five shillings when it was new. Stones and setting all sham.'

'If that ain't just what I said to myself from the first!' cried Mr. Windslipp in unaffected disgust. 'The artfulness o' these here young parties!'

'Never mind, cabby, you sha'n't lose by the job,' said Gerald. 'She'd like to have her bracelet back, I daresay; but she would not like *you* to go to her house with it. I shall be calling on her to-morrow, and will give it to her. In the mean time—you're

an honest fellow, and here's half a sovereign for you to drink her health. Now drive me to the Royal Opera as fast as you can go.'

'In fifteen minutes, guv'nor—barring there's a revolution with barricades in Oxford-street,' cried Mr. Windslipp, almost lifting his horse into the air with the lash of his whip.

While Gerald was being driven at a gallop towards the theatre, where he expected to find Seraphine, Lady Pentarvon, almost exhausted in body and mind, was painfully making her way to her home on foot, aided by directions which she was compelled from time to time to ask of such persons as she chanced to meet.

On reaching her house her powers were completely exhausted, and she could only give herself helplessly into the hands of her astonished maid, who undressed her and placed her in her bed.

Meanwhile Gerald had reached the opera

in time to rejoin Seraphine before the performance was entirely finished.

'Well?' demanded Seraphine eagerly, 'did she fall into your trap?'

'Yes, and no,' replied Gerald half angrily.

'What do you mean?—that she came, but not alone?'

'No, I don't mean that. She came and alone; but—'

'But what, then?'

With almost savage emphasis Gerald related all that had passed between himself and Lady Pentarvon. Seraphine listened without interrupting him, but she found great difficulty in concealing from him a mocking and contemptuous smile that rose to her lips as he detailed the completeness of his failure.

'Now you know the whole story,' he said, 'what do you say to it?'

'If I tell you what I think, I shall hurt your feelings,' she replied.

'Don't let that prevent your saying what you think.'

'I think, then, my dear Sir Gerald, that in this matter you have behaved like a fool.'

'What should I have done?'

'Precisely everything you did *not* do! A pretty champion,' she added to herself, 'I have chosen to work out my vengeance!'

Gerald made her no answer, but bit his lip with vexation. She laughed outright at his obvious mortification.

'It is impossible not to see that you cut a most ridiculous figure in all this affair,' she said.

'At all events, I need not stay to be laughed at to my face,' he replied fiercely; 'so good-night and good-bye. I shall take her back her bracelet, and to-morrow morning set off for Italy.'

'What do you mean by "her bracelet"?' she demanded quickly. 'You didn't tell me anything about a bracelet.'

'I didn't think of it—it does not seem

to me a matter of any importance,' he replied, after telling her how he had become possessed of Lady Pentarvon's bracelet.

Seraphine looked at him for a moment with an expression of contemptuous wonderment.

'And you really think the possession of this bracelet a matter of no importance?' she cried. 'Why, man, you must have suddenly lost the little portion of common sense you were ever master of! This bracelet coming into your hands in such a manner changes the whole situation.'

'How?' cried Gerald.

'See, the opera is over,' she replied, rising. 'Come home with me, and on the way I will tell you how to turn your preposterous defeat into a victory—if you have brains enough to follow my instructions.'

CHAPTER V.

MUTTERINGS OF THE COMING STORM.

Lord Pentarvon waited till after midnight for the return of Gerald to the club, and then went home, a prey to agonies of doubt as to the upshot of his friend's interposition; dreading, indeed, to find his way into his house intercepted by the reckless Jewess, who, he believed, held him at her mercy.

By degrees the power to think returned to Lady Pentarvon, and her first clear view of what had passed between her and Gerald determined her to tell her husband; but this determination, on farther reflection, she abandoned. Informed of the unpardonable wrong that had been done to him, Lord Pentarvon would call his false friend to ac-

count; and what danger and distress might not spring from their angry collision!

But, more than ever, she now felt that so long as she remained in London it would be impossible for her to enjoy a moment's tranquillity of mind, pursued as she would be by the constant dread of some new attempt on the part of Gerald, or of the discovery of his wrong by her husband.

One result of her adventure, and that a happy one, entirely unforeseen by the contrivers of the abominable plot of which she had so nearly been made the victim, was that it did away with her jealousy. It had been made only too clear to her that Gerald had not shrunk from any rascality to give an appearance of truth to his falsehoods; she therefore utterly disbelieved all the accusations he had made against her husband, and banished from her mind even the evidence of Lord Pentarvon's culpability that had recently appeared to tell so conclusively against him.

'Might I not myself appear guilty?' she asked herself; 'and may it not be equally so with my dear husband?'

On his arrival at home, Lord Pentarvon inquired for Lady Pentarvon, and was informed by her maid that her ladyship had retired to rest—the woman discreetly refraining from making any remark on her mistress's condition. The state of anxious doubt in which he had been left by Gerald made it impossible for him to fulfil the promise he had given his wife, of quitting London on the following day; and this change in his plans he thought it best to communicate to Lady Pentarvon before retiring to his own room.

Concealing his troubled state of mind as completely as he could, he entered his wife's room, and, finding her awake, told her of the necessity he was under of putting off their departure for two or three days. Disappointed as she was, no jealous suspicions returned to her mind; and, in parting with

him for the night, she only urged him not to delay their journey an hour longer than was absolutely necessary for the settlement of the business which claimed his presence.

Early on the following morning he sent a note of urgent inquiry to Gerald's house in Mayfair, but received back answer that Sir Gerald had not returned home since the day before. Astonished and greatly mortified, as well as terrified, by this withholding of information on Gerald's part, he refrained from visiting the clubs where he might accidentally and inconveniently have met him. Two days thus passed, during which he was in entire ignorance of the events which had taken place, in which he was so deeply concerned.

Gerald was about to mount his horse for an early ride in the Park, on the morning of the third day after Lady Pentarvon's escape, when Lord Carleon alighted from his brougham, and asked him to put off his ride for a short time. For several weeks the

two had not met, and Gerald would rather their meeting had been still longer deferred; but he nevertheless expressed himself as being delighted to see Lord Carleon, and altogether at his disposal.

Lord Carleon was pale, and his face wore an expression of strongly-marked sadness; from which signs Gerald augured ill of the subject about which his visitor had come to talk to him.

'My dear Gerald,' said Lord Carleon very gravely, as soon as they were seated in the drawing-room, whither Gerald had conducted him, 'the immediate cause of my visit refers to certain reports that have come to my ears.'

'Certain reports concerning me, of course you mean? and of an unpleasant nature, equally of course?'

'More than unpleasant, if they are well founded,' replied Lord Carleon, looking him searchingly in the face.

'Serious, then?'

'Very. These reports affirm—I beg you to observe that in repeating them I play only the part of an echo—these reports affirm that you have boasted of being the lover of the Countess of Pentarvon.'

A smile of indescribable fatuity rose to Gerald's lips as he answered,

'Lady Pentarvon is certainly one of the handsomest women in London, and I don't imagine you think it would be any kind of dishonour to be her lover?'

Beneath the look which Lord Carleon cast upon him he fairly quailed. He turned his head away, as he asked with forced carelessness,

'And what else do they say of me?'

'They say,' continued Lord Carleon, 'that you go about describing, to whoever will listen to you, the details of your *liaison;* and that to the incredulous you exhibit as a *gage d'amour* a bracelet worn by the Countess at your first love-meeting—a

bracelet which, in fact, a hundred persons know to have belonged to her.'

Gerald had turned away his head, and his eyes were cast down, but nevertheless he felt the searching gaze of Lord Carleon still pressing like a weight upon his brow. He blushed and paled by turns, and tried in vain to preserve an appearance of calmness.

'Well, what else do they say of me?' he asked for the second time.

'What else!' cried Lord Carleon; 'is not that enough?'

'O, I suspected something very much worse was to follow,' replied Gerald.

Lord Carleon started, and for a moment appeared unable to speak.

'Gerald,' he said at length, 'do you know, I feel almost forced to believe that what is said of you is *true!*'

'And what if it were?'

'What!' cried Lord Carleon, 'is it possible you do not understand the shame with which you would be covered?'

'I confess I don't,' replied Gerald half-doggedly.

There was a moment of silence before Lord Carleon spoke again. When he did speak the tone of his voice was profoundly sad, but he was calm.

'Weigh well what I am going to say to you, Gerald,' he said. 'The man who, by force of love or force of cunning, becomes the lover of a woman of position whose life has till then been pure, whose future may be compromised, whose honour may be destroyed, by a suspicion, by a single indiscreet word—the man who stands in this relation with such a woman must lock up her secret in the very depths of his heart as in a trebly-walled tomb, and must suffer death rather than betray his trust.

'If he does otherwise,' continued Lord Carleon, 'if he holds cheap the trust of her who, for him alone, has put her honour in jeopardy, that man is a coward!—yes, a coward! who will be scorned by every one

who has an uncorrupted heart beating in his breast. That man is a coward, Gerald—almost as vile as one who has calumniated a woman; and ask yourself with what immeasurable contempt you yourself would contemplate such a man!'

Gerald, his face averted, and crimsoned with shame, felt as if beaten down by a thunder-stroke. The whole infamy of his conduct stood plainly revealed to his mind. He blushed for himself; yet, strange to say, with this passing emotion there was no admixture of remorse, or desire to retrace the false steps he had taken, or to repair the harm he had done. His pride had suffered a cruel humiliation, that was all; his heart was closed against repentance.

The conversation was prolonged; but Lord Carleon saw, with a sad heart, that Gerald was completely obdurate, and at length left him.

'I'm in a devil of a mess, that's clear,' he said to himself; 'and all through follow-

ing the counsel of that infernal woman! I've walked into the difficulty like a blind fool! But it's too late now to go back. I must face the worst that can happen as best I can!'

CHAPTER VI.

THE STORM BURSTS FORTH.

Gerald dined at his club alone, and after dinner strolled into the smoking-room, where Lord Alfred Fitzcole, Lord Fordwick, and a dozen other of his friends and acquaintances were seated. He advanced towards Lord Fordwick, who, having been out of town for some little time past, had heard nothing of the scandal with which Lord Carleon had taxed his friend, and therefore held out his hand with his accustomed cordiality. Gerald wrung it warmly, and then turned to Lord Alfred Fitzcole, and held out his hand to him.

'Good-evening,' said Lord Alfred in an icy tone, stooping to take a light for his

cigar, as if he had not noticed the proffered hand.

There was no mistaking the intention of the act; but Gerald pretended not to observe it, and, after exchanging a few insignificant words, left the smoking-room.

'Why, what's up between you two?' asked Lord Fordwick as soon as Gerald was out of ear-shot.

'Sir Gerald Dalbright is a young scoundrel!' replied Lord Alfred.

'The devil he is!' cried Lord Fordwick. 'What has he been doing to earn such a reputation?'

Lord Alfred informed his friend of all the facts as Lord Carleon had stated them to Gerald himself, only withholding the name of the Countess of Pentarvon.

'By heaven!' cried Lord Fordwick, when he had heard all that his friend chose to tell him, 'if that's all true, you may well call him a young scoundrel!'

'There's no doubt in my mind that all

I have told you is true; and I have besides a personal reason for being savagely indignant with the fellow. The lady in question is one of my sister's most intimate and most valued friends, and it was, to some extent, through me that he was received into her house.'

'One of Lady Ebsworth's most valued friends! Good heavens! you don't mean—'

Lord Alfred stopped his friend before he had pronounced the name that rose to his lips.

'I see you guess rightly,' he said.

At that moment the door of the smoking-room opened, and Lord Pentarvon entered. His face was deadly pale, and it was impossible to see him without being deeply impressed by his whole appearance.

Lord Alfred Fitzcole and Lord Fordwick exchanged rapid and significant glances. Their looks said as plainly as spoken words: 'He knows all!—what is going to happen?'

Lord Pentarvon at once crossed to the two friends, who pressed his hand with almost affectionate warmth, but neither of them spoke.

'Gentlemen,' said Lord Pentarvon after a few seconds, and with visible agitation, 'I was in search of you.'

Still neither of them replied, and he continued:

'I believe I may call you my friends—my two friends.'

'You may, my dear Pentarvon,' they replied warmly.

'And that I may put your friendship to the test?'

'In any way, my dear fellow.'

'Thank you,' cried Lord Pentarvon. 'Come with me.'

He moved towards the door as he spoke, and both the friends felt that there would have been indelicacy in attempting to detain him for explanation. They followed him at once therefore, without addressing

to him any question as to his intentions in taking them with him.

Lord Pentarvon led them into the card-room, where three or four parties were seated at whist, Gerald being at one of the tables exactly facing the door.

At the moment the door opened, Gerald happened to raise his eyes, and saw the entrance of Lord Pentarvon and his two friends.

Doubtless he read, as in a book, all that was written in the face of the Countess of Pentarvon's husband. He turned pale—paler than Lord Pentarvon himself; a nervous trembling seized upon him, and his cards fell from his unnerved hand on to the table.

'Sir Gerald Dalbright,' said Lord Pentarvon in a loud voice, 'I wish to speak with you.'

'With me?' inquired Gerald hesitatingly, his brows becoming for a moment crimson. 'If my partners will excuse my absence for

a few moments, I will come to you into the drawing-room.'

'I prefer that what I have to say to you should be heard by the gentlemen now present,' replied Lord Pentarvon. 'I desire that they should know what you are; that, as the outrage of which you have been guilty has been public, the reparation shall be no less so!'

'I do not understand you,' stammered Gerald; 'I know nothing of the outrage to which you allude.'

'Do you not?' replied Lord Pentarvon. 'I will instruct you, then. Sir Gerald Dalbright, I have opened my house to you, given you my confidence, called you my friend, taken your hand as I should that of my own brother. You have repaid me for all this by the most cowardly of all treason against my confidence and affection. You have attempted to seduce my wife, and, disdainfully repulsed by her, have sought to dishonour her by falsehood and calumny.'

Gerald attempted to speak, but Lord Pentarvon commanded him to be silent.

'Your conduct might be sufficiently punished by my contempt and scorn,' he continued, advancing as he spoke; 'but your reptile slime has been spurted upon a name too pure and too dear to me not to rouse me to anger. For such wretches as you there is but one fitting chastisement. It is this!'

And he dashed his clenched fist full into Gerald's face.

Stunned for a moment by the blow, Gerald measured his length upon the floor; but he quickly sprang to his feet, his teeth set and his eyes flaming with rage. He made frantic attempts to rush on Lord Pentarvon, but he was withheld and overpowered by the men present.

'Gentlemen,' said Lord Pentarvon, 'I beg you will forgive me for having provoked this shameful scene. I ought to have controlled my passion; but perhaps the great-

ness of the outrage I have endured may bespeak your indulgence.'

Gerald was by this time literally foaming at the mouth; and seeing Lord Pentarvon turning to quit the room with his friends Lord Alfred Fitzcole and Lord Fordwick, he almost shrieked,

'Hear me, Lord Pentarvon! I swear your wife has been my mistress; and here in proof I have her love-token.' He freed his right hand and produced Lady Pentarvon's bracelet from a breast-pocket in his coat. 'Look at it; do you not know it?'

For an instant Lord Pentarvon staggered as if he had been struck. The next moment he had seized Gerald by the throat as with the grip of a tiger, and torn the bracelet from his hand.

As quickly as possible the two were separated, and Gerald was laid fainting upon a couch. Lord Alfred Fitzcole and Lord Fordwick led Lord Pentarvon out of the room.

Returned at length to consciousness, and able to collect his scattered senses, Gerald looked anxiously into the faces of the men surrounding him. A glance sufficed to make him aware of the fact that from not one of these men might he expect to receive the least sympathy. More or less lax of morals, as he knew most of them to be, he saw they one and all condemned his conduct.

Choking with suppressed rage and shame, he rose and left the room, after stammering a sort of clumsy apology for the disturbance of which he had been made the cause. He was still too much agitated to be able to form any plan of action. One thought dominated all others in his mind — the thought of taking vengeance on Lord Pentarvon for the indignity he had this night suffered at his hands.

As he was passing down the steps of the club-house, he found himself face to face with Lord Carleon, who was about

to enter. He paused almost involuntarily.

'He is the only friend on whom I can rely,' he thought. '*He* will not desert me.'

Lord Carleon also had stopped; but he did not offer his hand.

'I have heard what has happened,' he said in a grave and sad tone of voice; 'Lord Fordwick has just told me. I am sorry for you.'

'Sorry for me!' cried Gerald savagely.

'You can hardly have forgotten what I said to you this morning. My convictions have not changed since then.'

'I have forgotten nothing,' replied Gerald; 'but I can now think only of one thing—revenge! Lord Pentarvon must fight me. Not here in England; I know that's impossible; but in France. He *must*, I tell you. He shall kill me, or I will kill him. And you—I have no one I can look to but you—you must be my second.'

Lord Carleon, who had lived much on the Continent, and to whom, therefore, the idea of a duel was more familiar than it would have been to most of his London associates, exhibited no sign of surprise, and answered calmly,

'If you wish it; but on one condition.'

'One condition! What is it?' demanded Gerald.

'That you permit me, even in the presence of your adversary and his seconds, to say exactly what I think on all this matter.'

'What do you mean?' asked Gerald.

'My meaning is very simple,' replied Lord Carleon. 'The second in a duel should always be—or at least appear to be—convinced of the right of the man he represents. Now I do not conceal it from you, I consider you to be completely in the wrong; and if I consent to act as your second, it is only because I do not wish to abandon you at this crisis of your affairs,

and not from any kind of sympathy with your quarrel.'

For a moment Gerald hesitated to accept the service offered on such a galling condition; but he reflected he had no choice.

'Bitterly humiliating as your reservation is,' he replied moodily, 'I accept your offer.'

'I will call on you to-morrow morning at eleven, then,' said Lord Carleon. 'In the mean time you will have to find another person to act with me. Good-night.'

Without farther salutation on either side they parted. Lord Carleon entered the club, Gerald walked in the direction of his home, but had no settled purpose in his mind as to what he should do with himself for the rest of the evening. The thought occurred to him of going to Seraphine and venting his rage upon her; but remembering how invariably he had been victimised by her diabolical astuteness, he formed quite another determination in her regard.

'Curse her!' he cried through his half-clenched teeth; 'to her infernal prompting I owe my present condition. I'll never see her again.'

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE EVENT OF DEATH.

Two days passed, during which time it was arranged that, on the morning of the fourth day after the struggle in the card-room of the club, Gerald and Lord Pentarvon, accompanied by their seconds, were to meet in the Bois de Vincennes.

As far as it was possible during these two days Lord Pentarvon held himself aloof from his wife, whose ears no whisper of the intended duel reached. Ignorant of what had really passed between her and Gerald, but never for a moment giving way to doubt or suspicion of her perfect innocence, he refrained from alluding even to the subject. The performance of a sad and bitter task lay before him, the accomplish-

ment of which excluded from his mind all lesser considerations.

Lady Pentarvon was keenly alive to the looks and bearing of her husband, and sensible of his avoidance of her, but was unable to account for his manner towards her. Again and again she was impelled to question him—even to tell him the whole story of Gerald's perfidy; but she was withheld by the fear of unwittingly making matters worse.

On the evening of the second day they dined in almost unbroken silence; and shortly after the meal was finished Lady Pentarvon retired to her room, to hide the tears she could no longer restrain. Lord Pentarvon sat for a while, pale, silent, and thought-oppressed; then went to his room, into which he carefully locked himself.

The expression of his face was that of a sombre and sad resignation. With slow steps he crossed the room to an ebony bureau, the sliding lid of which he raised,

and then sat, or rather sank into a chair before it, resting his head upon his hands. In this position he remained nearly a quarter of an hour. At the end of that time he raised his head.

His cheeks were flushed and his temples throbbed feverishly. He looked around him, and though his eyes were dry, their look expressed an agony that tears alone could soften. At length he rose from his seat and crossed the room to the mantelpiece, from which he carried to the bureau the two candles which were burning there.

Then reseating himself, he took a folded paper from one of the drawers, and without looking at its contents, placed it in an envelope which he sealed with black wax, and on which he wrote, 'This is my last will and testament.'

He then proceeded to write a letter. He wrote slowly, meditating each phrase, and weighing every word before employing it. Sometimes he paused for several min-

utes at a time; sometimes the pen seemed to fall from his tired fingers; sometimes his head sank between his hands, and when he again raised his face his eyes were dim with tears.

The letter was long—several hours were spent in its composition; it was four o'clock in the morning before the last line was written. All symptoms of fever had vanished from the face of the writer, which was become as pale and rigid as that of a marble statue. Cold drops of perspiration stood upon his brow, as, with trembling hands, he folded the sheets he had covered, and placed them in an envelope, which, as in the case of his will, he sealed with black wax.

On the outside of the envelope he wrote, 'To the Countess of Pentarvon;' and, in a lower line, he added these words, 'To be given to her in the event of my death.'

His task achieved, his strength appeared suddenly to desert him. Physical suffering, caused by excess of fatigue, triumphed over

moral force. He sank down in his chair, his head dropped on his chest, and consciousness faded from him.

During the long hours of the night, Lady Pentarvon's agony of mind had been little less acute than that of her husband. Hour by hour she had listened for his coming step, till shapeless fears had crowded upon her, and she became unable any longer to bear the uncertainty out of which they sprang.

With noiseless tread she crept to the door of her husband's room. The outer door was locked, but a feeble gleam of light was visible at the keyhole, attesting the fact of her husband being still up, though no sound indicated his being astir. She returned to her room, and waited another half hour—another hour—without relief to her suspense.

Again she was about to creep to the fastened door of her husband's room, when it suddenly flashed upon her recollection

that there was a second door, approachable through his dressing-room. Almost uttering a cry of joy, she hurried along a corridor, out of which the outer door of the dressing-room opened, and to her intense relief gained immediate access to the door giving entrance to her husband's room.

This door also was unlocked—indeed it was partially open, and by gently pushing it, Lady Pentarvon was enabled to gain a complete view of Lord Pentarvon, as he sat motionless before the bureau. in the feeble light of the almost burnt-out candles.

She started at the sight, and with difficulty suppressed the shriek of terror that rose to her lips. Her hand was raised to touch his arm—to wake him, if it was sleep and not death that was upon him; but she paused to look into his face, and what she saw there dissipated her terror.

His eyes were shut, and a dark circle was marked about each, and from the closed lids big tear-drops were stealing slowly, one

by one, down his white cheeks. The sight of this silent suffering made her heart yearn towards him with ineffable pity.

'What, what is the grief that pursues him thus, even in his sleep?' she cried.

Her eyes rested on the two enclosures which lay upon the desk. She bent forward eagerly and read the superscription on the envelope containing the will.

'Merciful heaven!' she cried, 'what has happened to make him think of this?'

The second envelope, with its still more alarming address, attracted her attention, and she seized it eagerly.

'His death!' she cried; 'and he has spent all the night in writing this! He believes that he is on the eve of death.'

She broke open the envelope, and read, in breathless alarm, the letter it held.

As we have said, the letter was long, and we have described the agony of which it was the offspring. In it Lord Pentarvon

minutely described the consequences of his intimacy with Gerald, and passed upon himself the severest condemnation for not having resisted the evil influences brought to bear upon him by that false friend. It besought her forgiveness for the sorrow she had been made to endure, and it took leave of her with a fervent prayer that in heaven they might be again united to all eternity in the love that had been denied them on this earth.

Lady Pentarvon read, or rather devoured, this letter. As she proceeded, her eyes dilated, the trembling of her hands communicated itself to her whole frame, and her bosom rose and fell as if her heart would have burst the narrow prison in which it was held captive. As soon as she had come to the end, she cast the letter from her on to the floor, and with a cry of long-repressed emotion, threw herself on her knees by her husband's side.

'Henry, Henry!' she cried through the

sobs that rose from her bosom, 'it is I—your Blanche!'

Lord Pentarvon woke with a start of alarm, and, on seeing his wife, was for a moment utterly unable to account for her presence. But when he remarked the open door of his dressing-room, and saw the letter lying at Lady Pentarvon's feet, he understood all that had happened.

'You have read that letter, Blanche?' he asked.

'I have read it, Henry! But, O, unless you believe me to be guilty, why have you had this terrible thought of exposing your life—our two lives—for do you think that I could lose you and yet live?'

END OF VOL. II.

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